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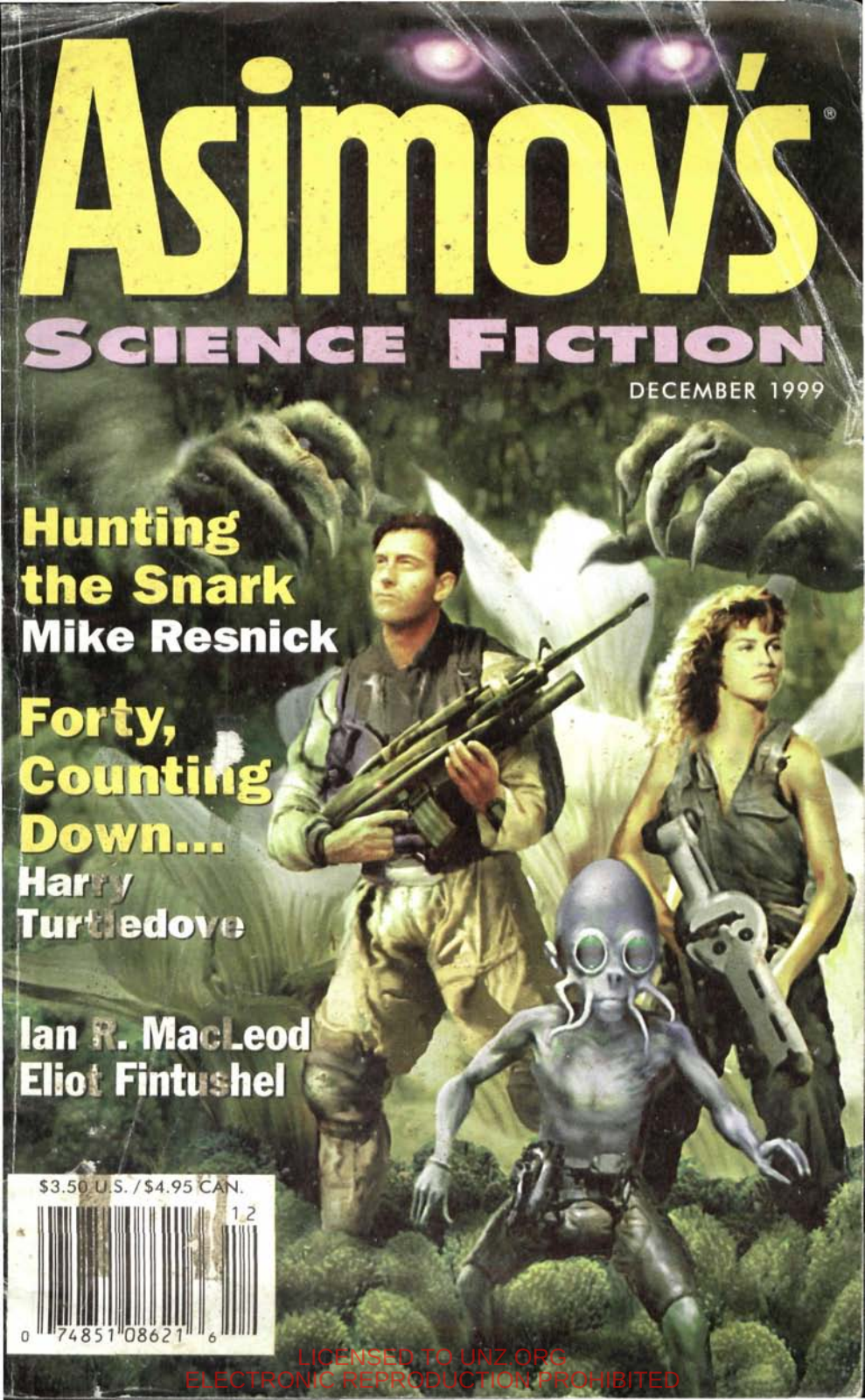

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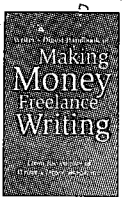

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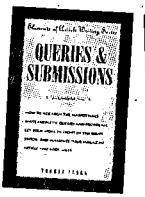

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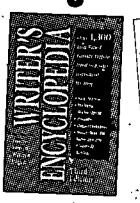

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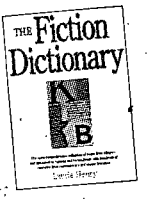

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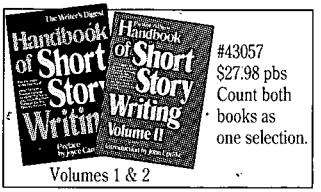

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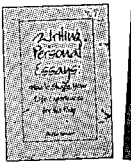

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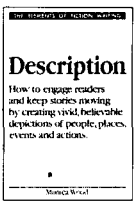
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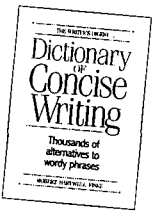

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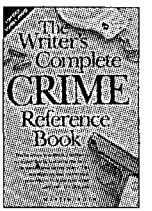

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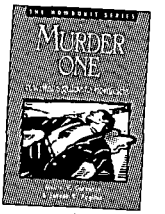

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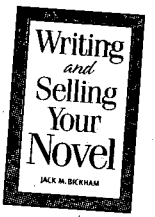

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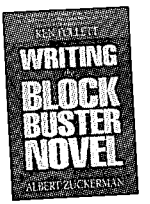

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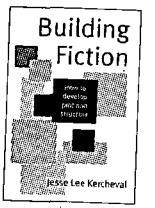

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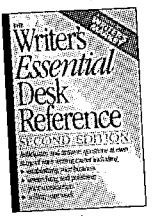

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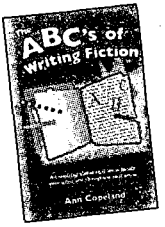

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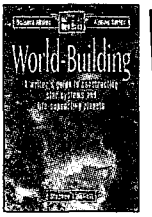

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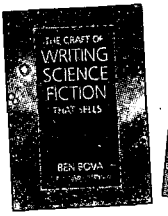

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12

96

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NOVELLAS

12 Forty, Counting Down — Harry Turtledove
96 Hunting the Snark — Mike Resnick

NOVELETTE

60 The Chop Girl — Ian R. MacLeod

SHORT STORIES

50 Jaycee — Daniel Abraham
78 Viper — Alastair Reynolds
92 Open Mike — Eliot Fintushel

POETRY

48 Christmas (after we all get time machines) — Geoffrey A. Landis
59 Curse of the Quark's Wife — Bruce Boston
91 Correcting the Record — Timons Esaias

DEPARTMENTS

4 Reflections: The Great Tradition — Robert Silverberg
8 On the Net: Comics — James Patrick Kelly
132 On Books — Paul Di Filippo
142 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

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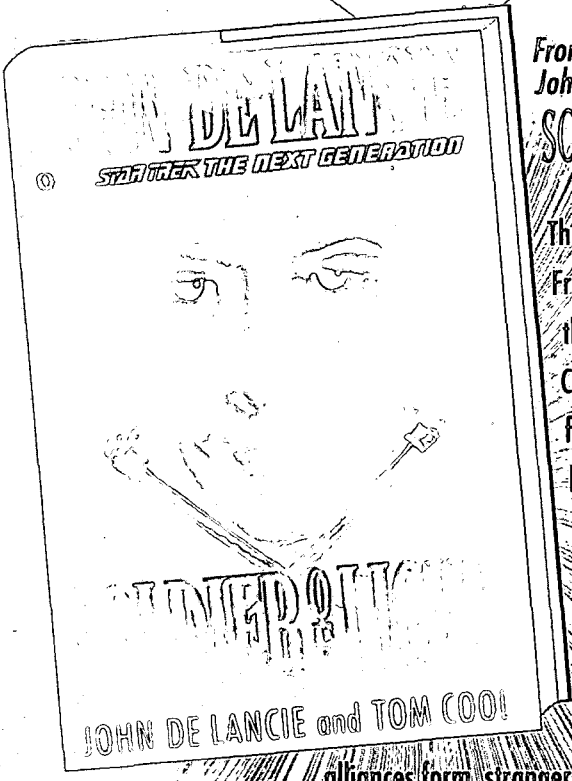

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE GREAT TRADITION

The distinguished modern Russian poet Joseph Brodsky once remarked that he wrote to please his predecessors, not his contemporaries. It's an illuminating comment—Brodsky was not only a great poet but also a brilliant thinker, two things that don't automatically go together—and it set me wondering about my own attitudes and practices as a writer.

He wrote to please his predecessors. I wonder which poets he meant by that. Brodsky was born in Russia in 1940: He was a man of outspoken views, which brought him a prison term (1964-65) for "social parasitism." He remained troublesome to the Soviet government, though, and was forced into exile in 1972, settling in the United States. There he attained worldwide fame as a poet and a critic, writing his essays in English and his poems in Russian, which he then translated into English. His work brought him the Nobel Prize for Poetry in 1987 and many a lesser award. In 1991 President Bush named him poet laureate of the United States. He was only fifty-five when he died in 1996.

I have no doubt that Alexander Pushkin was one of the poets to whom Joseph Brodsky inwardly offered his work for approval: all Russian poets work in the shadow of Pushkin. Among the modern Russians whom he would have regarded as watching and judging his poetry would certainly have been Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam, and, I would guess, Boris Pasternak. But the multicultural Brodsky would surely not have limited his list of revered predecessors to Russian poets alone: he declared Frost, Hardy, and Auden to be among his favorites, and I suspect that when he wrote he looked also toward the whole of the great poetic tradition from Homer and Virgil and Horace onward: Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Keats, Byron, Yeats, Eliot, and on and on. And humbly saw himself as a successor in that glorious line.

What, you may ask, does all this have to do with science fiction, and the science fiction of R. Silverberg in particular?

I've been writing the stuff for more than forty-five years, now. That's by no means the longest career in modern science fiction; among writers currently active, I can point to such folk as Poul Anderson, Frederik Pohl, Frank M. Robinson, Gordon R. Dickson, Jack Vance, and five or six others who began publishing five or ten years before I did—a list topped by Jack Williamson, whose first stories appeared seven years before I was born. Still, a forty-five-year career makes me a distinctly senior figure in a field in which most of the current top writers are less than fifty years old. It's a long enough time to make me ask the big question of myself. Have I, with all of my vast output of stories and novels, been adding anything significant to the great tradition of modern science fiction, or have I simply been taking up a lot of space in print?

(The quick answer, lest you think I'm pleading for your approval here, is, yes, I think my work in its totali-

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ty has been worth the trees that died for it.) But I arrive at that bit of self-approval in a Brodskyesque fashion, by looking backward at the writers who shaped my imagination and assessing, as well as I can, my place among them.

Science fiction has changed a great deal since I broke in as a new writer in 1954. Back then it was a magazine-based field. Paperback publishing in the United States was just getting under way, and scarcely any hardcover publishers would touch anything so odd and esoteric as SF. For those who loved to read or write it, everything was centered in three important monthly magazines: *Astounding Science Fiction* (now *Analog*), *Galaxy*, and *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. It was in those magazines where things happened first, although the work of a privileged few writers (Heinlein, Asimov, Bradbury) did eventually find its way into book form a year or two after its magazine appearance.

The editors of those magazines—John W. Campbell, Horace L. Gold, and Anthony Boucher, respectively—were powerful personalities who had significant and distinct ideas about what constituted a good science fiction story. The leading writers of the day—Theodore Sturgeon, Henry Kuttner, Isaac Asimov, James Blish, Alfred Bester, Clifford Simak, Frederik Pohl, Cyril Kornbluth, Arthur C. Clarke, Poul Anderson, Philip K. Dick, Robert Sheckley, Philip Jose Farmer, etc.—wrote short stories, novelettes, and occasional novels for Campbell, Gold, and Boucher, and what they couldn't place with them went to the secondary (and lower-paying) magazines, edited by such people as Robert Lowndes, Larry Shaw, Howard Browne, Samuel Mines, and Sam Merwin, Jr. Those men also had firm ideas about the nature of what they wanted to publish, and

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the combination of strong editorial personalities and a dazzling constellation of first-rate writers working in the field all at once had a mighty impact on me as a teenage would-be science fiction writer. My tastes as a reader and my whole approach as a writer were formed by the great science fiction magazines of that bygone period.

Today just a few science fiction magazines still survive, and, however excellent their product may be, their impact on the overall publishing scene is not great. The heart of the SF action is in book publishing, primarily paperbacks, although a good many hardcover science fiction books appear every year. As a result we have a changed paradigm of excellence in science fiction. In the old days, the standard of excellence was set by Messrs. Campbell, Gold, and Boucher, and to a certain degree by some of the lesser editors. The stories that they bought and published month after month represented, ipso facto, the ideal form of science fiction, the sort of thing that any young writer should aspire to create.

Today, though, where everything is dominated by sales figures, editors tend to be self-effacing figures and the size of a writer's sales determines the value of his work. The writer who proves to have potent popular appeal becomes a defining case: book publishers will seek the work of such a writer with avidity, and will urge other writers to write "in the tradition of" X or Y or Z, even if the work of X and Y and Z is crude subliterate junk. Thus the writer who manages somehow to sell fifty or sixty thousand copies of his last novel in hardcover format, or half a million paperbacks, becomes an eight hundred-pound gorilla who reshapes the field in his own image. Style, character, plot, ingenuity of concept—these are all secondary to the dollar return.

I was raised in a different tradition. I was fighting for a place on the contents pages of magazines full of stories by the likes of Sturgeon, Blish, Bradbury, Clarke, Anderson, and Bester. I couldn't hope to match their level of attainment—not at nineteen, I couldn't!—but I knew that I had damned well better *try*, which meant mastering the techniques by which stories are constructed, and then applying those techniques to the special kind of ideation that is science fiction.

One of my masters was James Blish, the precise, waspish, and formidable author of a multitude of brilliant stories now largely forgotten. "We know," Blish wrote in a 1952 essay that had enormous effect on me, "that there is a huge body of available technique in fiction writing, and that the competence of a writer—entirely aside from the degree of his talent—is determined by how much of this body he can use. (Talent is measured in some part by how much he adds to it.)" Elsewhere in the same piece he observed, "Technical competence in storytelling is of course not the sole factor which turns a piece of fiction into a work of art. Freshness of idea, acuity of observation, depth of emotional penetration are all crucial; and there are other such factors. But technical competence is the one completely indispensable ingredient; the use of an old idea, for instance, is seldom fatal in itself, but clumsy craftsmanship invariably is."

This sounds a little quaint, in the era of gigantic, clumsily written novels linked into infinitely long series, each volume of which sells more copies than all of Jim Blish's books together. Modern-day commodified publishing has put an entirely new spin on things for the science fiction writer: acuity of observation, depth of emotional pen-

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etration, freshness of idea, and all those other things dear to the best SF writers of Blish's generation are often seen now as impediments to a book's success, and the writer who is most avidly courted by the publishers is the one who has found the most efficacious way of reaching great hordes of readers who are looking, evidently, for the prose equivalent of television.

Which doesn't mean that good writing is extinct in science fiction—as the work of Kim Stanley Robinson, Joe Haldeman, Walter Jon Williams, Ursula K. Le Guin, Nancy Kress, and James Patrick Kelly, to name just the first half dozen that come into my mind out of a long list of outstanding modern writers, amply demonstrates. But then there are all those awful books with the glitzy covers that get the big sales, and sell and sell and sell, and jostle the more classical kind of science fiction out of print. Those are the books the editors really crave; they merely tolerate the other kind.

I don't begrudge the writers of those books, many of whom are good friends of mine, their whopping sales figures. They have the great skill of knowing how to give the public what the public wants, and they are rewarded accordingly, and so be it. I applaud their immense commercial success. I just don't have to read their books myself.

No, I'm back there in the era of Campbell, Gold, and Boucher most of the time. Those are the editors I'm still trying to please, and I still want the admiration of my colleagues of that period, too. When I set out to write a book or a story, I do, of course, want it to reach a wide and enthusiastic audience, and I'm only too well aware that most of the people who wrote for and read *Galaxy* and *Astounding* and *F&SF* in 1953 aren't around any more. My work depends on the approbation of today's readership.

But in my own mind, the plaudits I want are those of the writers who fed my imagination when I was in my teens. Like Brodsky looking over his shoulder at Pushkin and Frost and Yeats, I write even now for Blish and Bester and Pohl, for Ted Sturgeon and Henry Kuttner, even for H.G. Wells. I like to regard myself as one of the last survivors of that group, upholding the great tradition they created. And so I'm engaged in a constant dialog with the past—forever seeking to prove to myself that I'm worthy of moving in the company of my idols of half a century ago. O

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

COMICS

True Confessions

For little Jimmy Kelly, growing up in the 'burbs of New York City, the early sixties were all about comics. Superhero comics, to be exact. Before I discovered science fiction, I was a comic book nut. I would blow my entire weekly allowance on the *Justice League of America* and *Green Lantern* and then, suddenly, helplessly, on every title that Marvel released, even the sappy *Millie the Model**. I was once the proud owner of *Fantastic Four #1* and *Amazing Fantasy #15,* wherein Spider-Man first spun a web. If only Mom had kept those allegedly trashy comics and thrown out all my report cards instead! I could sell them off now and probably buy *Asimov's*. Would you still love this magazine if it were called *Thrilling James Patrick Kelly Tales?*

But of course, I did discover science fiction and over the years an odd thing happened. It's funny, but I'm afraid I began to look down my nose at comics, in much the same way that some literary types look down their noses at—*gulp!*—sci-fi! It was kids' stuff, no? The plots were all gimcrack and the characters were nothing but caricatures. And then there was the way that some artists insisted on drawing muscles on muscles on muscles, until the heroes-in-tights-set began to look like walking cheese braids. Other than a brief fling with R. Crumb while I was in college, I stopped taking comics—all comics—seriously. [For a quick *Zap!* of 99 and 99/100 percent pure American derangement, check out **The Crumb Museum** (*http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Cafe/7958/crumb1.html*)]. Otherwise, when I picked a comic up, it was as a guilty pleasure.

It wasn't really until the late eighties that some friends coaxed me back to comics. I inhaled the dark and atmospheric *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* series and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series. Alas, these modern masters of the graphic novel in print are surprisingly net-shy, with the possible exception of Neil Gaiman, who seems to have had some input into the excellent **The Magician's Study** (*http://www.av.qnet.com/~raven/magick.html*). However, Moore and Miller are fortunate in their fans. There is a fine **Alan Moore Fan Site** (*http://www.mindspring.com/~scamper/moore/home.html*), created by loyal reader Stephen Camper. And the **Frank Miller Library** (*http://home.sol.no/~gojensen/miller/*) has been handsomely stocked by one G. O. Jensen.

But it was not only the bravura and sophistication of these breakthrough titles that got me interested in reading comics again. My eyes

*What was so sappy about Millie? She had great clothes, but she wasn't any more emotional than Superman —SW

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were opened by a wonderful comic book published in 1993: *Understanding Comics* by **Scott McCloud** (*http://www.scottmccloud.com*). If you are any kind of comic fan, you need to read this book!

Funny pixels

I was pleased to find that Scott McCloud has cut his own slice of cyberspace and not at all surprised that it is one of the most clever sites I've ever visited. Beware! If you get out of this site in under an hour, you just haven't done it justice. But that's okay; you'll probably be making many return visits. Explore the inventions section with its mysterious story machine and the dada card game, "Five Card Nancy," for which you'll need scissors and a disposable *Nancy* comic book. Even the welcome page is a delight. But the reason to visit this page is for its on-line comics. Scott McCloud says, "I think comics on the web have a great future but it's not going to be as simple as scanning in printed comics and putting some tags on them. Expect my comics to take some odd turns." As indeed they do, both literally and figuratively. A lot of Scott's work is wry and autobiographical, as in "My Obsession With Chess." But lest you think you have him pegged as a kind of Photoshop Woody Allen, click over to *Porphyria's Lover*, his adaptation of Robert Browning's 1837 poem. There's a word for this kind of stuff: wonderful!

It turns out that there are already a lot of online comics and more coming every day. Although some artists are following the scan-and-post strategy, others are experimenting, trying to understand the problems and opportunities the net has created for them. You can find some lovely, if not exactly cutting edge, comics at **The Matrix** (*http://www.whatisthematrix.com/*). While a great deal of this site is devoted to promoting the movie, which was a surprise hit last spring, it also features original comics and short stories set in the world of the Matrix and created by some of the top names in the field.

Some online comics seem to aspire to become animated cartoons, requiring installation of Macromedia's **Shockwave** (*http://www.macromedia.com/shockwave/download/*) plug-ins to make their pages dance. Plug-ins? *Plug-ins!* Uh-oh!

We interrupt this column to bring you a brief rant.

**&0!#$! Plug-ins*

I hate plug-ins. Maybe I'd feel differently if most browsers didn't collapse like houses of cards with annoying regularity. And of course there's no predicting a crash, unless I am in the middle of a deep research session, in which case one is usually imminent. I've tried **Internet Explorer** (*http://www.microsoft.com/windows/ie/*), **Opera** (*http://www.opera.com/*), and **Netscape** (*http://www.Netscape.com/computing/download/index.html*), and have settled on Netscape only because it's been the most stable of the bad lot. However, I am convinced that plug-ins do Netscape 4.05 no good. For example, I've had a history of trouble with RealAudio, now **RealPlayer** (*http://www.real.com/*), which I need for my fledgling career as an internet playwright. Its G2 incarnation finally seems to work all right, except now that it's gone out of date it hectors me every time I use it to download the new version. Maybe I don't want the latest bug-fest of your plugging software, okay? Leave me alone!

For years I have resisted using the Shockwave plug-ins, convinced

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that they'd shatter Netscape's fragile hold on the net. In fact, it was only as a service to you, my faithful reader(s), that I decided to put my system at risk so I could review these comic sites. I am forced to report that, thus far, my fears of being Shocked have proved unfounded. Both plug-ins downloaded promptly and installed without complaint. I have detected no side effects so far . . . although, come to think of it, maybe things have slowed down a few nanoseconds, except that's probably the fault of my **&0!#$!* ISP . . . now don't get me started!

We now return you to your regularly scheduled column.

Moving pictures

I wanted to like **Astounding Space Thrills** (*http://www.icomics.com/astoundingspacethrills/index.htm*) better than I did, but this is one comic that just didn't happen for me. For one thing, creator Steve Conley needs more bandwidth to play with. This ambitious comic has a soundtrack with a musical score and sound effects and spoken dialog as well as intermittent animation. It's too much for the modem of a mere mortal; this site crawls. The graphics remind me of computer games I stopped playing in the late eighties. And one of the actors would seem to be enrolled in the Walter Koenig School of Russian Accents. Ultimately, though, I don't think **Astounding Space Thrills** plays straight, and I could never quite twist myself enough to take it as camp.

Jonni Nitro, G Woman (*http://www.jonninitro.com*) is violent and slick and a lot of mindless fun. It is animated using high contrast black and white motion capture, so that the characters are "enacted" by real people. The effects are stylish and way cool and they play without noticeable pause through my 56 kps connection. Although there's a sound track complete with sfx and a driving score, the dialog is all written. While a backstory was struggling to emerge in the two installments I read, I can't recommend this to readers seeking insight into the human condition. Alex Ogle has written Jonni Nitro as a bloody-minded government agent who gives Very Bad People just what they deserve.

I stumbled onto my favorite online comic—and the idea for this column—while browsing the links page of **Susan Casper's Fantasyland** (*http://www.voicenet.com/~scasper/*). Sue is a friend and a fellow sciffy writer—thanks Sue! Her pick hit was **Argon Zark** (*http://www.netaxs.com/~cparker/front/hub. html*). Book 1 of Argon Zark, *Into the Bowels of the Information Organism, or How Can You Be in 27,000 Places at Once When You're Not Anywhere at All?* has evolved, or perhaps devolved, from the net to print but is Zarkived on the site. As I write this Zark perpetrator Charley Parker is deep into Book 2, where we find ourselves in the corridors of power at a secret and virtual meeting of the nine or ten guys who covertly run everything. Seems the guys are not happy with the way the internet is going. "Free information, home pages, egalitarian communication . . . chaos!" growls the evil CEO just as our hero Argon Zark, his lovely companion Zeta Fairlight and Cybert, their personal digital assistant, intrude into their meeting by means of . . . but then the rubber technology isn't exactly the point. This is lively satire, vividly rendered, and with special effects that you have to see to believe, despite the fact that they were done without recourse to plug-ins. About the only complaint I can lodge against Argon Zark is that Charley Parker's pro-

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ductivity has flagged of late. Send money and email encouragement if you want to see just how far online comics can go.

Then, Now, and Next

Even though the net titles may be my flavors of the month, comics have been and remain primarily a print medium. If, like me, there are gaps in your knowledge of what's been going on in Dead Tree Land, a good place to catch up is **The History of Superhero Comic Books** (*http://www.sigma.net/comichistory*). The title nicely sums up this impressive labor of love by Jamie Coville. If there are no deep insights, there is plenty of information well laid out in chapters and profusely illustrated with cover jpgs.

If on the other hand you want to know what's happening right now, try **Comic Book Resources** (*http://www.comicbookresources.com/*). Under the direction of Jonah Weiland, Executive Producer, CBR's standing in the world of comic books is roughly analogous to that of **Locus** (*http://www.locusmag.com*) or **Science Fiction Weekly** (*http://www.scifi.com/sfw/*) in science fiction. It features news of the industry, previews of upcoming titles, reviews, and an exhaustive links page. CBR is a must-bookmark for any comics fan.

For a look at where comics and the rest of modern culture might be headed, try **Re:Mote Induction** (*http://members.tripod.com/~rem_ind/index.htm*), a site that wears its rivets on its sleeve. According to Peter Morrison, its Editor/Designer. "It's about PUSHING culture—it's about finding something you like and sharing it with people! It's about being 3D, surround sound, interactive and in your face!" Re:Mote Induction tracks web site design and comics and games and film and other kinds of art that tend to lurk at the edge. It's dressed in black and prefers the lights turned down low. Although it could use a little ironic distance from itself, this is a site with vision and real ambition.

Exit

It occurs to me that one reason some people don't take comics seriously is the name. The *comics*. Or worse, the *funnies*. Some artists have taken to calling their work graphic novels, which is doubtless more appropriate but still a little stiff. Our graphic colleagues might learn from the experience we science fiction writers had when we tried to expunge the dreaded *sci-fi* from popular culture and replace it with *speculative fiction*.

That worked real well, didn't it? O

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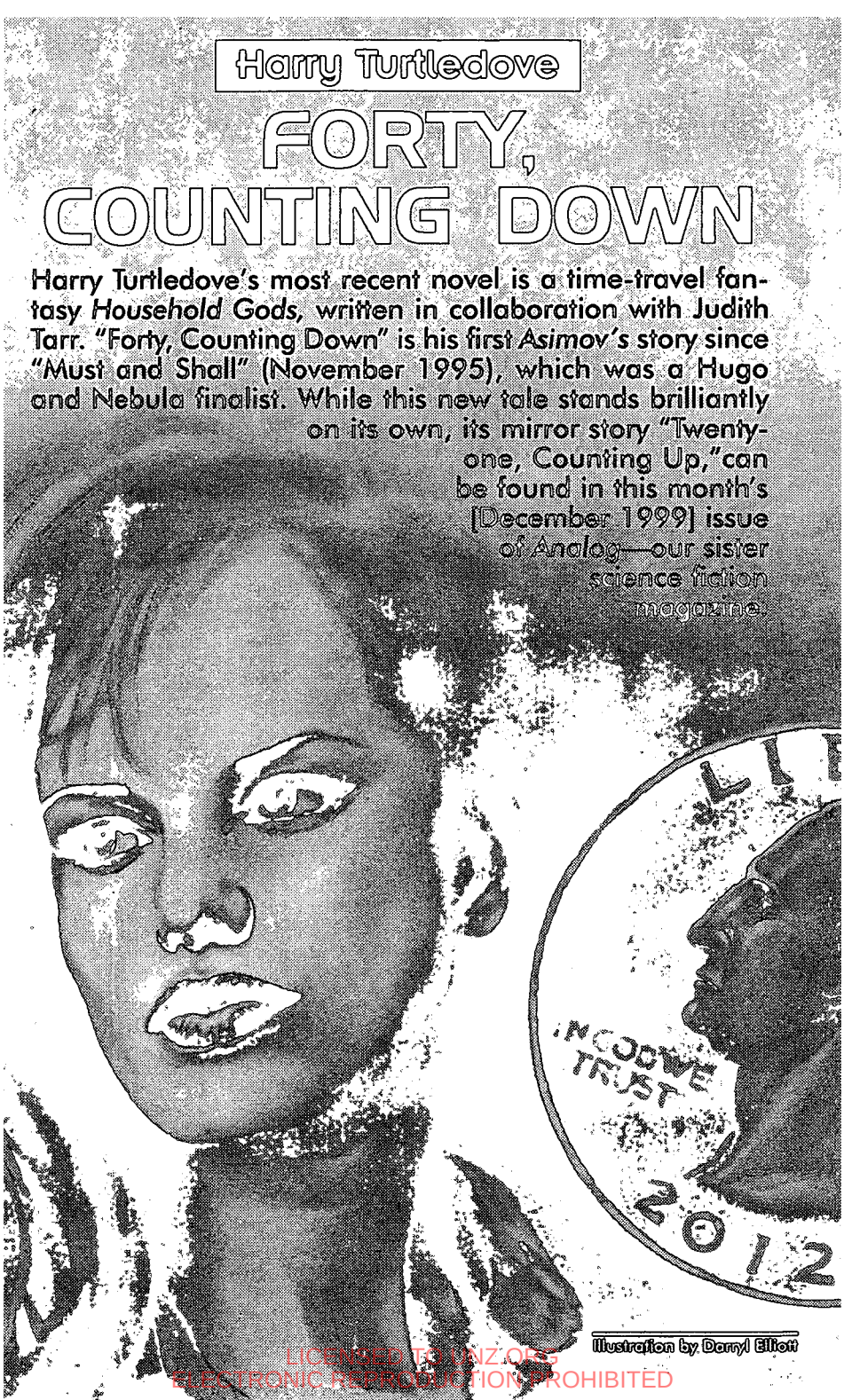
Harry Turtledove

FORTY, COUNTING DOWN

Harry Turtledove's most recent novel is a time-travel fantasy *Household Gods*, written in collaboration with Judith Tarr. "Forty, Counting Down" is his first *Asimov's* story since "Must and Shall" (November 1995), which was a Hugo and Nebula finalist. While this new tale stands brilliantly on its own, its mirror story "Twenty-one, Counting Up," can be found in this month's [December 1999] issue of *Analog*—our sister science fiction magazine.



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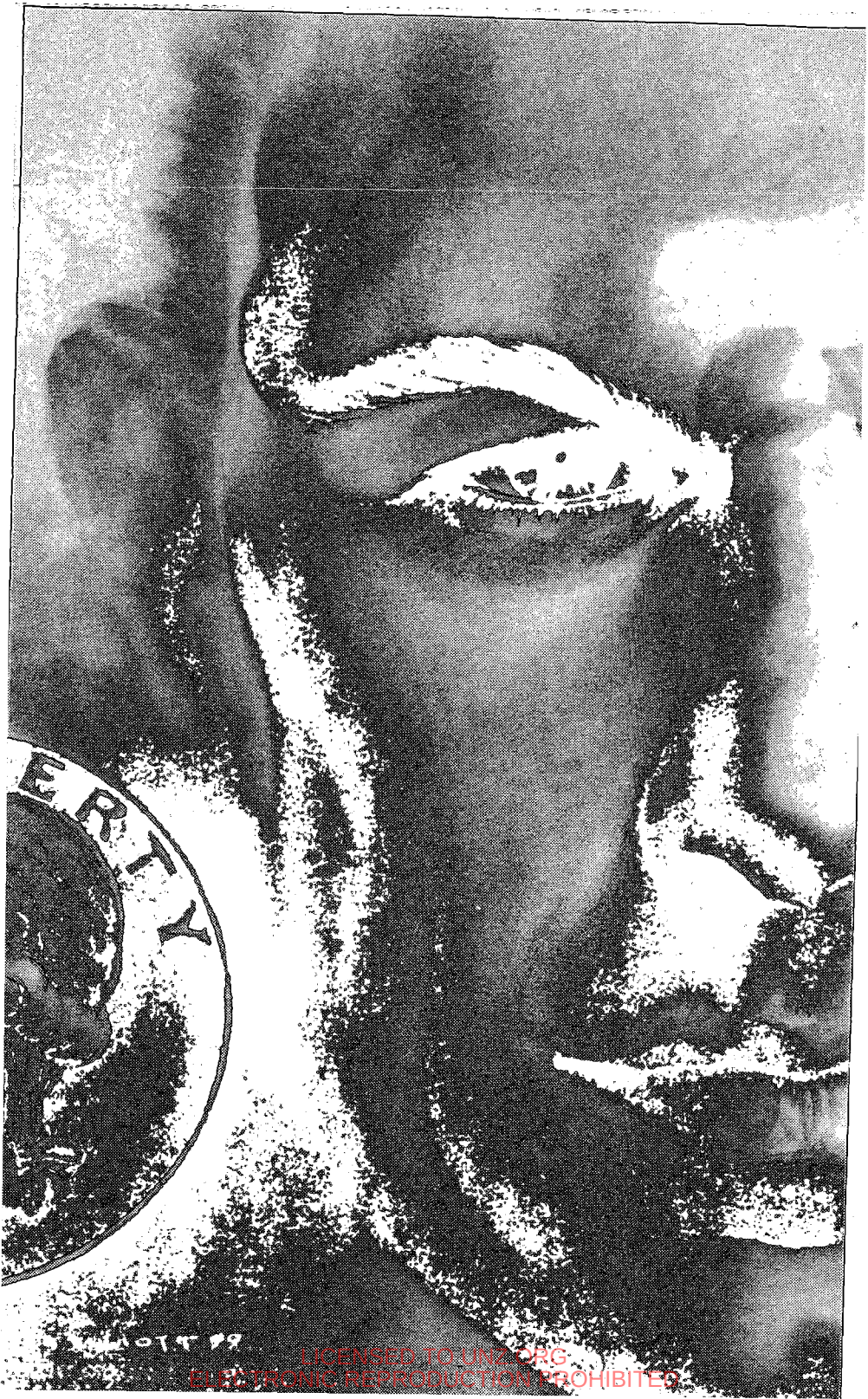

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"Hey, Justin!" Sean Peters's voice floated over the top of the Superstrings, Ltd., cubicle wall. "It's twenty after six—quitting time and then some. Want a drink or two with me and Garth?"

"Hang on," Justin Kloster answered. "Let me save what I'm working on first." He told his computer to save his work as it stood, generate a backup, and shut itself off. Having grown up in the days when voice-recognition software was imperfectly reliable, he waited to make sure the machine followed orders. It did, of course. Making that software idiotproof had put Superstrings on the map a few years after the turn of the century.

Justin got up, stretched, and looked around. Not much to see: the grayish-tan fuzzy walls of the cubicle and an astringently neat desktop that held the computer, a wedding photo of Megan and him, and a phone/fax. His lips narrowed. The marriage had lasted four years—four and a half, actually. He hadn't come close to finding anybody else since.

Footsteps announced Peters's arrival. He looked like a high school linebacker who'd since let most of his muscle go to flab. Garth O'Connell was right behind him. He was from the same mold, except getting thin on top instead of going gray. "How's the Iron Curtain sound?" Peters asked.

"Sure," Justin said. "It's close, and you can hear yourself think—most of the time, anyhow."

They went out into the parking lot together, bitching when they stepped from air conditioning to San Fernando Valley August heat. Justin's eyes started watering, too; L.A. smog wasn't so bad as it had been when he was young, but it hadn't disappeared.

An Oasis song was playing when the three software engineers walked into the Iron Curtain, and into air conditioning that was chillier than that at the office. The music took Justin back to the days when he'd been getting together with Megan, though he'd liked Blur better. "Look out," Sean Peters said. "They've got a new fellow behind the bar." He and Garth chuckled. They knew what was going to happen. Justin sighed. So did he.

Peters ordered a gin and tonic, O'Connell a scotch on the rocks. Justin asked for a Bud. Sure as hell, the bartender said, "I'll be right with you two gents"—he nodded to Justin's coworkers—"but for you, sir, I'll need some ID."

With another sigh, Justin produced his driver's license. "Here."

The bartender looked at him, looked at his picture on the license, and looked at his birthdate. He scowled. "You were born in 1978? No way."

"His real name's Dorian Gray," Garth said helpfully.

"Oh, shut up," Justin muttered, and then, louder, to the bartender, "Yeah, I really turned forty this past spring." He was slightly pudgy, but he'd been slightly pudgy since he was a toddler. And he'd been very blond since the day he was born. If he had any silver mixed with the gold, it didn't show. He also stayed out of the sun as much as he could, because he burned to a crisp when he didn't. That left him with a lot fewer lines and wrinkles than his buddies, who were both a couple of years younger than he.

Shaking his head, the bartender slid Justin a beer. "You coulda fooled me," he said. "You go around picking up high school girls?" His hands shaped an hourglass in the air.

"No." Justin stared down at the reflections of the ceiling lights on the polished bar.

"Middle school," Garth suggested. He'd already made his scotch disappear. Justin gave him a dirty look. It was such a dirty look, it got through to Sean Peters. He tapped Garth on the arm. For a wonder, Garth eased off.

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Justin finished the Bud, threw a twenty on the bar, and got up to leave. "Not going to have another one?" Peters asked, surprised.

"Nope." Justin shook his head. "Got some things to do. See you in the morning." Out he went, walking fast so his friends couldn't stop him.

As soon as the microchip inside Justin's deadbolt lock shook hands with the one in his key, his apartment came to life. Lamps came on. The stereo started playing the Pulp CD he'd left in there this morning. The broiler heated up to do the steak the computer knew was in the refrigerator. From the bedroom, the computer called, "Now or later?"

"Later," Justin said, so the screen stayed dark.

He went into the kitchen and tossed a couple of pieces of spam snailmail into the blue wastebasket for recycling. The steak went under the broiler; frozen mixed vegetables went into the microwave. Eight minutes later, dinner.

After he finished, he rinsed the dishes and silverware and put them in the dishwasher. When he closed the door, the light inside came on; the machine judged itself full enough to run a cycle in the middle of the night.

Like the kitchen, his front room was almost as antiseptically tidy as his cubicle at Superstrings. But for a picture of Megan and him on their honeymoon, the coffee table was bare. All his books and DVDs and audio CDs were arranged alphabetically by author, title, or group. None stood even an eighth of an inch out of place. It was as if none of them dared move without his permission.

He went into the bedroom. "Now," he said, and the computer monitor came to life.

A picture of Megan and him stood on the dresser, another on the nightstand. Her high school graduation picture smiled at him whenever he sat down at the desk. Even after all these years, he smiled back most of the time. He couldn't help it. He'd always been happy around Megan.

But she hadn't been happy around him, not at the end. Not for a while before the end, either. He'd been a long, long time realizing that. "Stupid," he said. He wasn't smiling now, even with Megan's young, glowing face looking right at him out of the picture frame. "I was stupid. I didn't know enough. I didn't know how to take care of her."

No wonder he hadn't clicked with any other woman. He didn't want any other woman. He wanted Megan—and he couldn't have her any more.

"E-mail," he told the computer, and gave his password. He went through it, answering what needed answering and deleting the rest. Then he said, "Banking." The computer had paid the monthly Weblink bill, and the cable bill, too. "All good," he told it.

The CD in the stereo fell silent. "Repeat?" the computer asked.

"No." Justin went out to the front room. He took the Pulp CD out of the player, put it in its jewel box, and put the jewel box exactly where it belonged on the shelf. Then he stood there in a rare moment of indecision, wondering what to pull out next. When he chose a new CD, he chuckled. He doubted Sean or Garth would have heard of the Trash Can Sinatras, let alone any of their music. His work buddies had listened to grunge rock back before the turn of the century, not British pop.

As soon as *Cake* started, he went back into the bedroom and sat down at the computer again. This time, he did smile at Megan's picture. She'd been crazy for the Trash Can Sinatras, too.

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The music made him especially eager to get back to work. "Superstrings," he said, and gave a password, and "Virtual reality" and another password, and "Not so virtual" and one more. Then he had to wait. He would have killed for a Mac a quarter this powerful back in 1999, but it wasn't a patch on the one he used at the office. The company could afford the very best. He couldn't, not quite.

He went to the keyboard for this work: for numbers, it was more precise than dictating. And he had to wait again and again while the computer did the crunching. One wait was long enough for him to go take a shower. When he got back, hair still damp, the machine hadn't finished muttering to itself. Justin sighed. But the faster Macs at the office couldn't leap these numbers at a single bound. What he was asking of his home computer was right on the edge of what it could do.

Or maybe it would turn out to be over the edge. In that case, he'd spend even more lunch hours in his cubicle in the days ahead than he had for the past six months. He was caught up on everything the people above him wanted. They thought he worked his long hours to stay that way.

"What they don't know won't hurt them," Justin murmured. "And it may do me some good."

He didn't think anyone else had combined superstring physics, chaos theory, and virtual reality this way. If anyone had, he was keeping quiet about it—nothing in the journals, not a whisper on the Web. Justin would have known; he had virbots out prowling all the time. They'd never found anything close. He had this all to himself . . . if he hadn't been wasting his time.

Up came the field parameters, at long, long last. Justin studied them. As the computer had, he took his time. He didn't want to let enthusiasm run away with him before he was sure. He'd done that half a lifetime ago, and what had it got him? A divorce that had blighted his life ever since. He wouldn't jump too soon. Not again. Not ever again. But things looked good.

"Yes!" he said softly. He'd been saying it that particular way since he was a teenager. He couldn't have named the disgraced sportscaster from whom he'd borrowed it if he'd gone on the rack.

He saved the parameters, quit his application, and had the computer back up everything he'd done. The backup disk went into his briefcase. And then, yawning, he hit the sack.

Three days later, Garth O'Connell was the first to gape when Justin came into the office. "Buzz cut!" he exclaimed, and ran a hand over his own thinning hair. Then he laughed and started talking as if the past twenty years hadn't happened: "Yo, dude. Where's the combat boots?"

In my closet, Justin thought. He didn't say that. What he did say was, "I felt like doing something different, that's all."

"Like what?" Garth asked. "Globalsearching for high school quail, like the barkeep said? The competition doesn't wear short hair any more, you know."

"Will you melt it down?" Justin snapped.

"Okay. Okay." Garth spread his hands. "But you better get used to it, 'cause everybody else is gonna say the same kind of stuff."

Odds were he was right, Justin realized gloomily. He grabbed a cup of coffee at the office machine, then ducked into his cubicle and got to work. That slowed the stream of comments, but didn't stop them. People would go by the cubicle, see the side view, do a double take, and start exclaiming.

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Inside half an hour, Justin's division head came by to view the prodigy. She rubbed her chin. "Well, I don't *suppose* it looks unbusinesslike," she said dubiously.

"Thanks, Ms. Chen," Justin said. "I just wanted to—"

"Start your mid-life crisis early." As it had a few evenings before, Sean Peters's voice drifted over the walls of the cubicle.

"And thank *you,* Sean." Justin put on his biggest grin. Ms. Chen smiled, which meant he'd passed the test. She gave his hair another look, nodded more happily than she'd spoken, and went off to do whatever managers did when they weren't worrying about haircuts.

Sean kept his mouth shut till lunchtime, when he stuck his head into Justin's cubicle and said, "Feel like going over to Omino's? I've got a yen for Japanese food." He laughed. Justin groaned. That made Peters laugh harder than ever.

Justin shook his head. Pointing toward his monitor, he said, "I'm brown-bagging it today. Got a ton of stuff that needs doing."

"Okay." Peters shrugged. "Anybody'd think you worked here or something. I'll see you later, then."

Between noon and half past one, Superstrings was nearly deserted. Munching on a salami sandwich and an orange, Justin worked on his own project, his private project. The office machine was better than his home computer for deciding whether possible meant practical.

"Yes!" he said again, a few minutes later, and then, "Time to go shopping."

Being the sort of fellow he was, he shopped with a list. Vintage clothes came from Aaardvark's Odd Ark, undoubtedly the funkiest secondhand store in town, if not in the world. As with his haircut, he did his best to match the way he'd looked just before the turn of the century.

Old money was easier; he had to pay only a small premium for old-fashioned smallhead bills at the several coin-and-stamp shops he visited. "Why do you want 'em, if you don't care about condition?" one dealer asked.

"Maybe I think the new bills are ugly," he answered. The dealer shrugged, tagging him for a nut but a harmless one. When he got to $150,000, he checked *money* off the list.

He got to the office very early the next morning. The security guard chuckled as he unlocked the door. "Old clothes and everything. Looks like you're moving in, pal."

"Seems like that sometimes, too, Bill." Justin set down his suitcases for a moment. "But I'm going out of town this afternoon. I'd rather have this stuff indoors than sitting in the trunk of my car."

"Oh, yeah." Bill nodded. He had to be seventy, but his hair wasn't any lighter than iron gray. "I know that song." He knew lots of songs, many dating back to before Justin was born. He'd fought in Vietnam, and been a cop, and now he was doing this because his pension hadn't come close to keeping up with skyrocketing prices. Justin wondered if his own would, come the day.

But he had different worries now. "Thanks," he said when the guard held the door for him.

He staggered up the stairs; thanks to the stash of cash (a new compact car here, nothing more, even with the premium he'd had to pay, but a young fortune before the turn of the century), some period clothes scrounged—like

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the Dilbert T-shirt and baggy jeans he had on—from secondhand stores, and the boots, those suitcases weren't light, and he'd never been in better shape than he could help. The backpack in which he carried his PowerBook and VR mask did nothing to make him more graceful, either.

Once he got up to the second floor, he paused and listened hard. "Yes!" he said when he heard nothing. Except for Bill down below, he was the only person here.

He went into the men's room, piled one suitcase on the other, and sat down on them. Then he took the laptop out of its case. He plugged the VR mask into its jack, then turned on the computer. As soon as it came up, he put on the mask. The world went black, then neutral gray, then neutral . . . neutral: no color at all, just virtual reality waiting to be made real.

It all took too long. He wished he could do this back at his desk, with an industrial-strength machine. But he didn't dare take the chance. This building had been here nineteen years ago. This men's room had been here nineteen years ago. He'd done his homework as well as he could. But his homework hadn't been able to tell him where the goddamn cubicle partitions were back before the turn of the century.

And so . . . the john. He took a deep breath. "Run program superstrings-slash-virtual reality-slash-not so virtual," he said.

The PowerBook quivered, ever so slightly, on his lap. His heart thudded. Talk about your moments of truth. Either he was as smart as he thought he was, or Garth or Sean or somebody would breeze in and ask, "Justin, what the *hell* are you doing?"

A string in space-time connected this place now to its earlier self, itself in 1999. As far as Justin knew, nobody but him had thought of accessing that string, of sliding along it, with VR technology. When the simulation was good enough, it became the reality—for a while, anyhow. That was what the math said. He thought he'd done a good enough job here.

And if he had . . . oh, if he had! He knew a hell of a lot more now, at forty, than he had when he was twenty-one. If he-now could be back with Megan for a while instead of his younger self, he could make things right. He could make things last. He knew it. He had to, if he ever wanted to be happy again.

I'll fix it, he thought. *I'll fix everything. And when I slide back to here-and-now, I won't have this emptiness in my past. Everything will be the way it could have been, the way it should have been.*

An image began to emerge from the VR blankness. It was the same image he'd seen before slipping on the mask: blue tile walls with white grouting, acoustic ceiling, sinks with a mirror above them, urinals off to the left, toilet stalls behind him.

"Dammit," he muttered under his breath. Sure as hell, the men's room hadn't changed at all.

"Program superstrings-slash-virtual reality-slash-not so virtual reality is done," the PowerBook told him.

He took off the mask. Here he sat, on his suitcases, in the men's room of his office building. 2018? 1999? He couldn't tell, not staying in here. If everything had worked out the way he'd calculated, it would be before business hours back when he'd arrived, too. All he had to do was walk out that front door and hope the security guard wasn't right there.

No. What he really had to hope was that the security guard wasn't Bill.

He put the computer in his backpack again. He picked up the suitcases

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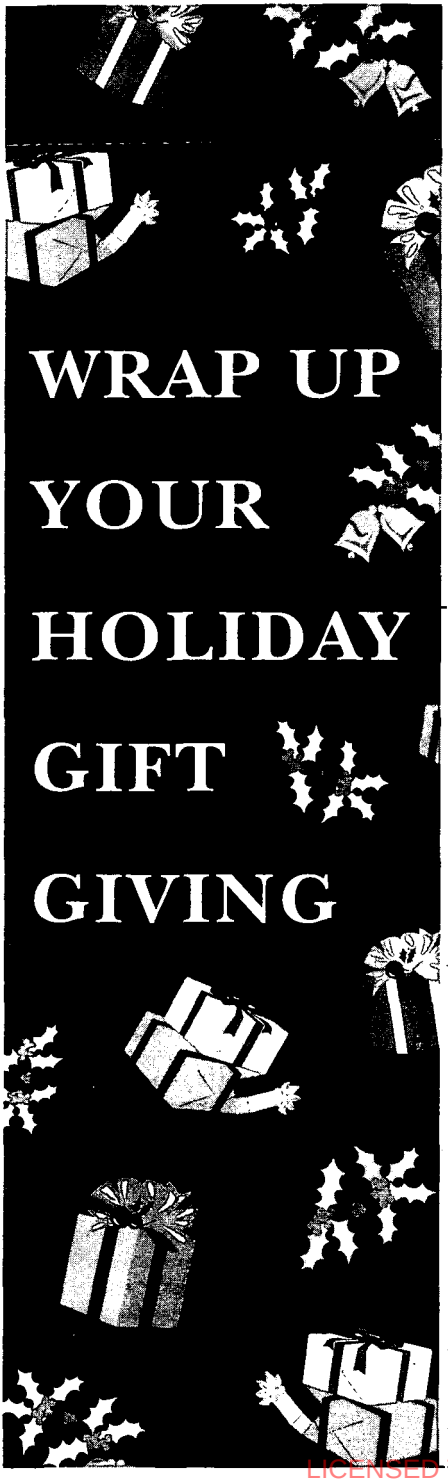

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and walked to the men's-room door. He set down a case so he could open the door. His heart pounded harder than ever. Yes? Or no?

Justin took two steps down the hall toward the stairs before he whispered, "Yes!" Instead of the gray-green carpet he'd walked in on, this stuff was an ugly mustard yellow. He had no proof he was in 1999, not yet. But he wasn't in Kansas any more.

The place had the quiet-before-the-storm feeling offices get waiting for people to show up for work. That fit Justin's calculations. The air conditioner was noisier, wheezier, than the system that had been—would be—in his time. But it kept the corridor noticeably cooler than it had been when he lugged his stuff into the men's room. The '90s had ridden an oil glut. They burned lavishly to beat summer heat. His time couldn't.

There was the doorway that led to the stairs. Down he went. The walls were different: industrial yellow, not battleship gray. When he got to the little lobby, he didn't recognize the furniture. What was there seemed no better or worse than what he was used to, but it was different.

If there was a guard, he was off making his rounds. Justin didn't wait for him. He opened the door. He wondered if that would touch off the alarm, but it didn't. He stepped out into the cool, fresh early-morning air of . . . when?

He walked through the empty lot to the sidewalk, then looked around. Across the street, a woman out power-walking glanced his way, but didn't stop. She wore a cap, a T-shirt, and baggy shorts, which proved nothing. But then he looked at the parked cars, and began to grin a crazy grin. Most of them had smooth jelly-bean lines, which, to his eyes, was two style changes out of date. If this wasn't 1999, it was damn close.

With a clanking rumble of iron, a MetroLink train pulled into the little station behind his office. A couple of people got off; a handful got on. In his day, with gas ever scarcer, ever costlier, that commuter train would have far more passengers.

Standing on the sidewalk, unnoticed by the world around him, he pumped a fist in the air. "I did it!" he said. "I really did it!"

Having done it, he couldn't do anything else, not for a little while. Not much was open at half-past five. But there was a Denny's up the street. Suitcases in hand, he trudged toward it. The young, bored-looking Hispanic waitress who seated him gave him a fishy stare. "You coulda left your stuff in the car," she said pointedly.

His answer was automatic: "I don't have a car." Her eyebrows flew upward. If you didn't have a car in L.A., you were nobody. If you didn't have a car and did have suitcases, you were liable to be a dangerously weird nobody. He had to say something. Inspiration struck: "I just got off the train. Somebody should've picked me up, but he blew it. Toast and coffee, please?"

She relaxed. "Okay—coming up. White, rye, or whole wheat?"

"Wheat." Justin looked around. He was the only customer in the place. "Can you keep an eye on the cases for a second? I want to buy a *Times*." He'd seen the machine out front, but hadn't wanted to stop till he got inside. When the waitress nodded, he got a paper. It was only a quarter. That boggled him; he paid two bucks weekdays, five Sundays.

But the date boggled him more. *June 22, 1999.* Right on the money. He went back inside. The coffee waited for him, steaming gently. The toast came up a moment later. As he spread grape jam over it, he glanced at the *Times* and wondered what his younger self was doing now.

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Sleeping, you dummy. He'd liked to sleep late when he was twenty-one, and finals at Cal State Northridge would have just ended. He'd have the CompUSA job to go to, but the place didn't open till ten.

Megan would be sleeping, too. He thought of her lying in a T-shirt and sweats at her parents' house, wiggling around the way she did in bed. Maybe she was dreaming of him and smiling. She would be smiling now. A few years from now . . . well, he'd come to fix that.

He killed forty-five minutes. By then, the restaurant was filling up. The waitress started to look ticked. Justin ordered bacon and eggs and hash browns. They bought him the table for another hour. He tried not to think about what the food was doing to his coronary arteries. His younger self wouldn't have cared. His younger self loved Denny's. *My younger self was a fool,* he thought.

He paid, again marveling at how little things cost. Of course, people didn't make much, either; you could live well on $100,000 a year. He tried to imagine living on $100,000 in 2018, and shook his head. You couldn't do it, not if you felt like eating, too.

When he went out to the parking lot, he stood there for forty minutes, looking back toward the train station. By then, it was getting close to eight o'clock. Up a side street from the Denny's was a block of apartment buildings with names like the Tivoli, the Gardens, and the Yachtsman. Up the block he trudged. The Yachtsman had a vacancy sign.

The manager looked grumpy at getting buzzed so early, but the sight of greenbacks cheered him up in a hurry. He rented Justin a one-bedroom furnished apartment at a ridiculously low rate. "I'm here on business," Justin said, which was true . . . in a way. "I'll pay three months in advance if you fix me up with a TV and a stereo. They don't have to be great. They just have to work."

"I'd have to root around," the manager said. "It'd be kind of a pain." He waited. Justin passed him two fifties. He nodded. So did Justin. This was business, too. The manager eyed his suitcases. "You'll want to move in right away, won't you?"

Justin nodded again. "And I'll want to use your phone to set up my phone service."

"Okay," the manager said with a sigh. "Come into my place here. I'll get things set up." His fish-faced wife watched Justin with wide, pale, unblinking eyes while he called the phone company and made arrangements. The manager headed off with a vacuum cleaner. In due course, he came back. "You're ready. TV and stereo are in there."

"Thanks." Justin went upstairs to the apartment. It was small and bare, with furniture that had seen better decades. The TV wasn't new. The stereo was so old, it didn't play CDs, only records and cassettes. Well, his computer could manage CDs. He accepted a key to the apartment and another for the security gates, then unpacked. He couldn't do everything he wanted till he got a phone, but he was here.

He used a pay phone to call a cab, and rode over to a used car lot. He couldn't do everything he wanted without wheels, either. He had no trouble proving he was himself; he'd done some computer forgery before he left to make his driver's license expire in 2003, as it really did. His number hadn't changed. Security holograms that would have given a home machine trouble here-and-now were a piece of cake to graphics programs from 2018. His

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younger self didn't know he'd just bought a new old car: a gray early-'90s Toyota much like the one he was already driving.

"Insurance is mandatory," the salesman said. "I can sell you a policy. . . ." Justin let him do it, to his barely concealed delight. It was, no doubt, highway robbery, especially since Justin was nominally only twenty-one. He'd dressed for the age he affected, in T-shirt and jeans. To him, though, no 1999 prices seemed expensive. He paid cash and took the car.

Getting a bank account wasn't hard, either. He chose a bank his younger self didn't use. Research paid off: he deposited only $9,000. Ten grand or more in cash and the bank would have reported the transaction to the government. He didn't want that kind of notice. He wanted no notice at all. The assistant manager handed him a book of temporary checks. "Good to have your business, Mr. Kloster. The personalized ones will be ready in about a week."

"Okay." Justin went off to buy groceries. He wasn't a great cook, but he was a lot better than his younger self. He'd had to learn, and had.

Once the groceries were stowed in the pantry and the refrigerator, he left again, this time to a bookstore. He went to the computer section first, to remind himself of the state of the art. After a couple of minutes, he was smiling and shaking his head. Had he done serious work with this junk? He supposed he had, but he was damned if he saw how. Before he was born, people had used slide rules because there weren't any computers yet, or even calculators. He was damned if he saw how they'd done any work, either.

But the books didn't have exactly what he wanted. He went to the magazine rack. There was a *MacAddict* in a clear plastic envelope. The CD-ROM that came with the magazine would let him start an account on a couple of online services. Once he had one, he could e-mail his younger self, and then he'd be in business.

If I—or I-then—don't flip out altogether, he thought. Things might get pretty crazy. Now that he was here and on the point of getting started, he felt in his belly how crazy they might get. And he knew both sides of things. His younger self didn't.

Would Justin-then even listen to him? He had to hope so. Looking back, he'd been pretty stupid when he was twenty-one. No matter how stupid he'd been, though, he'd have to pay attention when he got his nose rubbed in the facts. Wouldn't he?

Justin bought the *MacAddict* and took it back to his apartment. As soon as he got online, he'd be ready to roll.

He chose AOL, not Earthlink. His younger self was on Earthlink, and looked down his nose at AOL. And AOL let him pay by debiting his checking account. He didn't have any credit cards that worked in 1999. He supposed he could get one, but it would take time. He'd taken too much time already. He thought he had about three months before the space-time string he'd manipulated would snap him back to 2018. With luck, with skill, with what he knew then that he hadn't known now, he'd be happier there. But he had no time to waste.

His computer, throttled down to 56K access to the outside world, might have thought the same. But AOL's local access lines wouldn't support anything faster. "Welcome," the electronic voice said as he logged on. He ignored it, and went straight to e-mail. He was pretty sure he remembered

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his old e-mail address. *If I don't,* he thought, chuckling a little as he typed, *whoever* is *using this address right now will get awfully confused.*

He'd pondered what he would say to get his younger self's attention, and settled on the most provocative message he could think of. He wrote, *Who but you would know that the first time you jacked off, you were looking at Miss March 1993, a little before your fifteenth birthday? Nobody, right? Gorgeous blonde, wasn't she? The only way* I *know that is that I am you, more or less. Let me hear from you.* He signed it, *Justin Kloster, age 40,* and sent it.

Then he had to pause. His younger self would be working now, but he'd check his e-mail as soon as he got home. Justin remembered religiously doing that every day. He didn't remember getting e-mail like the message he'd just sent, of course, but that was the point of this exercise.

Waiting till half past five wasn't easy. He wished he could use his time-travel algorithm to fast-forward to late afternoon, but he didn't dare. Too many superstrings might tangle, and even the office machine up in 2018 hadn't been able to work out the ramifications of that. In another ten years, it would probably be child's play for a computer, but he wouldn't be able to pretend he was twenty-one when he was fifty. Even a baby face and pale gold hair wouldn't stretch that far. He hoped they'd stretch far enough now.

At 5:31, he logged onto AOL again. "Welcome!" the voice told him, and then, "You've got mail!"

"You've got spam," he muttered under his breath. And one of the messages in his mailbox *was* spam. He deleted it without a qualm. The other one, though, was from his younger self@earthlink.net.

Heart pounding, he opened the e-mail. *What kind of stupid joke is this?* his younger self wrote. *Whatever it is, it's not funny.*

Justin sighed. He supposed he shouldn't have expected himself-at-twenty-one to be convinced right away. This business was hard to believe, even for him. But he had more shots in his gun than one. *No joke,* he wrote back. *Who else but you would know you lost your first baby tooth in a pear at school when you were in the first grade? Who would know your dad fed you Rollos when he took you to work with him that day you were eight or nine? Who would know you spent most of the time while you were losing your cherry staring at the mole on the side of Lindsey Fletcher's neck? Me, that's who: you at 40.* He typed his name and sent the message.

His stomach growled, but he didn't go off and make supper. He sat by the computer, waiting. His younger self would still be online. He'd have to answer . . . wouldn't he? Justin hadn't figured out what he'd do if himself-at-twenty-one wanted nothing to do with him. The prospect had never crossed his mind. Maybe it should have.

"Don't be stupid, kid," he said softly. "Don't complicate things for me. Don't complicate things for yourself, either."

He sat. He waited. He worried. After what seemed forever, but was less than ten minutes, the AOL program announced, "You've got mail!"

He read it. *I don't watch* X-Files *much,* his younger self wrote, *but maybe I ought to. How could you know all that about me? I never told* anybody *about Lindsey Fletcher's neck.*

So far as Justin could recall, he hadn't told anyone about her neck by 2018, either. That didn't mean he'd forgotten. He wouldn't forget till they shoveled dirt over him.

How do I know? he wrote. *I've told you twice now—I know because I am*

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you, you in 2018. It's not X-Files *stuff—it's good programming.* The show still ran in endless syndication, but he hadn't watched it for years. He went on, *Believe me, I'm back here for a good reason,* and sent the e-mail.

Again, he waited. Again, the reply came back fast. He imagined his younger self eyeing the screen of his computer, eyeing it and scratching his head. His younger self must have been scratching hard, for what came back was, *But that's impossible.*

Okay, he typed. *It's impossible. But if it is impossible, how do I know all this stuff about you?*

More waiting. *The hell with it,* he thought. He'd intended to broil lamb chops, but he would have had to pay attention to keep from cremating them. He took a dinner out of the freezer and threw it into the tiny microwave built in above the stove. He could punch a button and get it more or less right. Back to the computer.

"You've got mail!" it said once more, and he did. *I don't know,* his younger self had written. *How* do *you know all this stuff about me?*

Because it's stuff about me, too, he answered. *You don't seem to be taking that seriously yet.*

The microwave beeped. Justin started to go off to eat, but the PowerBook told him he had more mail. He called it up. *If you're supposed to be me,* himself-at-twenty-one wrote, *then you'll look like me, right?*

Justin laughed. His younger self wouldn't believe that. He'd probably think it would make this pretender shut up and go away. But Justin wasn't a pretender, and didn't need to shut up—he could put up instead. *Right,* he replied. *Meet me in front of the B. Dalton's in the Northridge mall tomorrow night at 6:30 and I'll buy you dinner. You'll see for yourself.* He sent the message, then did walk away from the computer.

Eating frozen food reminded him why he'd learned to cook. He chucked the tray into the trash, then returned to the bedroom to see what his younger self had answered. Three words: *See you there.*

The mall surprised Justin. In his time, it had seen better years. In 1999, just a little after being rebuilt because of the '94 earthquake, it still seemed shiny and sparkly and new. Justin got there early. With his hair short, with the Cow Pi T-shirt and jeans and big black boots he was wearing, he fit in with the kids who shopped and strutted and just hung out.

He found out how well he fit when he eyed an attractive brunette of thirty or so who was wearing business clothes. She caught him doing it, looked horrified for a second, and then stared through him as if he didn't exist. At first, he thought her reaction was over the top. Then he realized it wasn't. *You may think she's cute, but she doesn't think you are. She thinks you're wet behind the ears.*

Instead of leaving him insulted, the woman's reaction cheered him. *Maybe I can bring this off.*

He leaned against the brushed-aluminum railing in front of the second-level B. Dalton's as if he had nothing better to do. A gray-haired man in maroon polyester pants muttered something about punk kids as he walked by. Justin grinned, which made the old fart mutter more.

But then the grin slipped from Justin's face. What replaced it was probably astonishment. Here came his younger self, heading up from the Sears end of the mall.

He could tell the moment when his younger self saw him. Himself-at-

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twenty-one stopped, gaped, and turned pale. He looked as if he wanted to turn around and run away. Instead, after gulping, he kept on.

Justin's heart pounded. He hadn't realized just how strange seeing himself would feel. And he'd been expecting this. For his younger self, it was a bolt from the blue. That meant he had to be the one in control. He stuck out his hand. "Hi," he said. "Thanks for coming."

His younger self shook hands with him. They both looked down. The two right hands fit perfectly. *Well, they would, wouldn't they?* Justin thought. His younger self, still staring, said, "Maybe I'm not crazy. Maybe you're not crazy, either. You look just like me."

"Funny how that works," Justin said. Seeing his younger self wasn't like looking in a mirror. It wasn't because himself-at-twenty-one looked that much younger—he didn't. It wasn't even because his younger self wasn't doing the same things he did. After a moment, he figured out what it was: his younger self's image wasn't reversed, the way it would have been in a mirror. That made him look different.

His younger self put hands on hips. "Prove you're from the future," he said.

Justin had expected that. He took a little plastic coin purse, the kind that can hook onto a key chain, out of his pocket and squeezed it open. "Here," he said. "This is for you." He handed himself-at-twenty-one a quarter.

It looked like any quarter—till you noticed the date. "It's from 2012," his younger self whispered. His eyes got big and round again. "Jesus. You weren't kidding."

"I told you I wasn't," Justin said patiently. "Come on. What's the name of that Korean barbecue place on . . . Reseda?" He thought that was right. It had closed a few years after the turn of the century.

His younger self didn't notice the hesitation. "The Pine Tree?"

"Yeah." Justin knew the name when he heard it. "Let's go over there. I'll buy you dinner, like I said in e-mail, and we can talk about things."

"Like what you're doing here," his younger self said.

He nodded. "Yeah. Like what I'm doing here."

None of the waitresses at the Pine Tree spoke much English. That was one reason Justin had chosen the place: he didn't want anybody eavesdropping. But he liked garlic, he liked the odd vegetables, and he enjoyed grilling beef or pork or chicken or fish on the gas barbecue set into the tabletop.

He ordered for both of them. The waitress scribbled on her pad in the odd characters of *hangul,* then looked from one of them to the other. "Twins," she said, pulling out a word she did know.

"Yeah," Justin said. *Sort of,* he thought. The waitress went away.

His younger self pointed at him. "Tell me one thing," he said.

"What?" Justin asked. He expected anything from *What are you doing here?* to *What is the meaning of life?*

But his younger self surprised him: "That the Rolling Stones aren't still touring by the time you're—I'm—forty."

"Well, no," Justin said. That was a pretty scary thought, when you got down to it. He and his younger self both laughed. They sounded just alike. *We would,* he thought.

The waitress came back with a couple of tall bottles of OB beer. She hadn't asked either one of them for an ID, for which Justin was duly grateful. His

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younger self kept quiet while she was around. After she'd gone away, himself-at-twenty-one said, "Okay, I believe you. I didn't think I would, but I do. You know too much—and you couldn't have pulled that quarter out of your ear from nowhere." He sipped at the Korean beer. He looked as if he would sooner have gone out and got drunk.

"That's right," Justin agreed. *Stay in control. The more you sound like you know what you're doing, the more he'll think you know what you're doing. And he has to think that, or this won't fly.*

His younger self drank beer faster than he did, and waved for a second tall one as soon as the first was empty. Justin frowned. He remembered drinking more in his twenties than he did at forty, but didn't care to have his nose rubbed in it. He wouldn't have wanted to drive after two big OBs, but his younger self didn't seem to worry about it.

With his younger self's new beer, the waitress brought the meat to be grilled and the plates of vegetables. She used aluminum tongs to put some pork and some marinated beef over the fire. Looking at the strips of meat curling and shrinking, himself-at-twenty-one exclaimed, "Oh my God! They killed Kenny!"

"Huh?" Justin said, and then, "Oh." He managed a feeble chuckle. He hadn't thought about *South Park* in a long time.

His younger self eyed him. "If you'd said that to me, I'd have laughed a lot harder. But the show's not hot for you any more, is it?" He answered his own question before Justin could: "No, it wouldn't be. 2018? Jesus." He took another big sip of beer.

Justin grabbed some beef with the tongs. He used chopsticks to eat, ignoring the fork. So did his younger self. He was better at it than himself-at-twenty-one; he'd had more practice. The food was good. He remembered it had been.

After a while, his younger self said, "Well, *will* you tell me what this is all about?"

"What's the most important thing in your life right now?" Justin asked in return.

"You mean, besides trying to figure out why I'd travel back in time to see me?" his younger self returned. He nodded, carefully not smiling. He'd been looser, sillier, at twenty-one than he was now. Of course, he'd had fewer things go wrong then, too. And his younger self went on, "What could it be but Megan?"

"Okay, we're on the same page," Justin said. "That's why I'm here, to set things right with Megan."

"Things with Megan don't need setting right." Himself-at-twenty-one sounded disgustingly complacent. "Things with Megan are great. I mean, I'm taking my time and all, but they're great. And they'll stay great, too. How many kids do we have now?"

"None." Justin's voice went flat and harsh. A muscle at the corner of his jaw jumped. He touched it to try to calm it down.

"None?" His younger self wasn't quick on the uptake. He needed his nose rubbed in things. He looked at Justin's left hand. "You're not wearing a wedding ring," he said. He'd just noticed. Justin's answering nod was grim. His younger self asked, "Does that mean we don't get married?"

Say it ain't so. Justin did: "We get married, all right. And then we get divorced."

His younger self went as pale as he had when he first saw Justin. Even at

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twenty-one, he knew too much about divorce. Here-and-now, his father was living with a woman not much older than he was. His mother was living with a woman not much older than he was, too. That was why he had his own apartment: paying his rent was easier for his mom and dad than paying him any real attention.

But, however much himself-at-twenty-one knew about divorce, he didn't know enough. He'd just been a fairly innocent bystander. He hadn't gone through one from the inside. He didn't understand the pain and the emptiness and the endless might-have-beens that kept going through your mind afterward.

Justin had had those might-have-beens inside his head since he and Megan had fallen apart. But he was in a unique position, sitting here in the Pine Tree eating *kimchi*. He could do something about them.

He could. If his younger self let him. Said younger self blurted, "That can't happen."

"It can. It did. It will," Justin said. The muscle started twitching again.

"But—how?" Himself-at-twenty-one sounded somewhere between bewildered and shocked. "We aren't like Mom and Dad—we don't fight all the time, and we don't look for something on the side wherever we can find it." Even at twenty-one, he spoke of his parents with casual contempt. Justin thought no better of them in 2018.

He said, "You can fight about sex, you can fight about money, you can fight about in-laws. We ended up doing all three, and so . . ." He set down his chopsticks and spread his hands wide. "We broke up—will break up—if we don't change things. That's why I figured out how to come back: to change things, I mean."

His younger self finished the second OB. "You must have wanted to do that a lot," he remarked.

"You might say so." Justin's voice came harsh and ragged. "Yeah, you just might say so. Since we fell apart, I've never come close to finding anybody who makes me feel the way Megan did. If it's not her, it's nobody. That's how it looks from here, anyhow. I want to make things right for the two of us."

"Things *were* going to be right." But his younger self lacked conviction. Justin sat and waited. He was better at that than he had been half a lifetime earlier. Finally, himself-at-twenty-one asked, "What will you do?"

He didn't ask, *What do you want to do?* He spoke as if Justin were a force of nature. Maybe that was his youth showing. Maybe it was just the beer. Whatever it was, Justin encouraged it by telling his younger self what he *would* do, not what he'd like to do: "I'm going to take over your life for a couple of months. I'm going to be you. I'm going to take Megan out, I'm going to make sure things are solid—and then the superstring I've ridden to get me here will break down. You'll live happily ever after: I'll brief you to make sure you don't screw up what I've built. And when I get back to 2018, I *will have lived* happily ever after. How does that sound?"

"I don't know," his younger self said. "You'll be taking Megan out?"

Justin nodded. "That's right."

"You'll be . . . taking Megan back to the apartment?"

"Yeah," Justin said. "But she'll think it's you, remember, and pretty soon it'll be you, and it'll keep right on being you till you turn into me, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," his younger self said. "Still . . ." He grimaced. "I don't know. I don't like it."

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"You have a better idea?" Justin folded his arms across his chest and waited, doing his best to be the picture of inevitability. Inside, his stomach tied itself in knots. He'd always been better at the tech side of things than at sales.

"It's not fair," himself-at-twenty-one said. "You *know* all this shit, and I've gotta guess."

Justin shrugged. "If you think I did all this to come back and tell you lies, go ahead. That's fine." It was anything but fine. But he couldn't let his younger self see that. "You'll see what happens, and we'll both be sorry."

"I don't know." His younger self shook his head, again and again. His eyes had a trapped-animal look. "I just don't know. Everything sounds like it hangs together, but you could be bullshitting, too, just as easy."

"Yeah, right." Justin couldn't remember the last time he'd said that, but it fit here.

Then his younger self got up. "I won't say yes and I won't say no, not now I won't. I've got your e-mail address. I'll use it." Out he went, not quite steady on his feet.

Justin stared after him. He paid for both dinners—it seemed like peanuts to him—and went home himself. His younger self needed time to think things through. He saw that. Seeing it and liking it were two different things. And every minute himself-at-twenty one dithered was a minute he couldn't get back. He stewed. He fumed. He waited. What other choice did he have?

You could whack him and take over for him. But he rejected the thought with a shudder. He was no murderer. All he wanted was some happiness. Was that too much to ask? He didn't think so, not after all he'd missed since Megan made him move out. He checked his e-mail every hour on the hour.

Two and a half mortal days. Justin thought he'd go nuts. He'd never dreamt his younger self would make him wait so long. At last, the computer told him, "You've got mail!"

All right, dammit, himself-at-twenty-one wrote. *I still don't know about this, but I don't think I have any choice. If me and Megan are going to break up, that* can't *happen. You better make sure it doesn't.*

"Oh, thank God," Justin breathed. He wrote back, *You won't be sorry.*

Whatever, his younger self replied. *Half of me is sorry already. More than half.*

Don't be, Justin told him. *Everything will be fine.*

It had better be, his younger self wrote darkly. *How do you want to make the switch?*

Meet me in front of the B. Dalton's again, Justin answered. *Park by the Sears. I will, too. Bring whatever you want in your car. You can move it to the one I'm driving. I'll do the same here. See you in two hours?*

Whatever, his younger self repeated. Justin remembered saying that a lot. He hoped it meant *yes* here. The only things he didn't want his younger self getting his hands on here were his laptop (though it would distract himself-at-twenty-one from worrying about Megan if anything would) and some of his cash. He left behind the TV and the stereo and the period clothes—and, below the underwear and socks, the cash he wasn't taking along. His younger self could eat and have some fun, too, provided he did it at places where Megan wouldn't run into him.

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This time, his younger self got to the mall before him. Thoroughly grim, himself-at-twenty-one said, "Let's get this over with."

"Come on. It's not a root canal," Justin said. Now his younger self looked blank—he didn't know about root canals. Justin wished *he* didn't; that was a bit of the future less pleasant to contemplate than life with Megan. He went on, "Let's go do it. We'll need to swap keys, you know."

"Yeah." Himself-at-twenty-one nodded. "I had spares made. How about you?"

"Me, too." Justin's grin twisted up one corner of his mouth. "We think alike. Amazing, huh?"

"Amazing. Right." His younger self started back toward Sears. "This better work."

"It will," Justin said. *It has to, goddammit.*

They'd parked only a couple of rows apart. His younger self had a couple of good-sized bundles. He put them in Justin's car while Justin moved his stuff to the machine himself-at-twenty-one had been driving. "You know where I live," his younger self said after they'd swapped keys. "What's my new address?"

"Oh." Justin told him. "The car's insured, and you'll find plenty of money in the underwear drawer." He put a hand on his younger self's shoulder. "It'll be fine. Honest. You're on vacation for a couple of months, that's all."

"On vacation from my *life*." Himself-at-twenty-one looked grim again. At twenty-one, everything was urgent. "Don't fuck up, that's all."

"It's my life, too, remember." Justin got into the car his younger self had driven to the mall. He fumbled a little, finding the right key. When he fired up the engine, the radio started playing KROQ. He laughed. Green Day was the bomb now, even if not quite to his taste. It wasn't music for people approaching middle age and regretting it. He cranked the radio and drove back to his younger self's apartment.

The Acapulco. He nodded as he drove up to it. It looked familiar. That made him laugh again. It hadn't changed. He had.

After he drove through the security gate, he found his old parking space more by letting his hands and eyes guide his brain than the other way round. He couldn't remember his apartment number at all, and had to go to the lobby to see which box had KLOSTER Dymo-taped onto it. He walked around the pool and past the rec room hardly anybody used, and there it was—his old place. But it wasn't old now. This was where his younger self had lived and would live, and where he was living now.

As soon as he opened the door, he winced. He hadn't remembered the bile-colored carpet, either, but it came back in a hurry. He looked around. Here it was—all his old stuff, a lot of it things he hadn't seen in half a lifetime. Paperbacks, CDs, that tiny statuette of a buglike humanoid standing on its hind legs and giving a speech . . . During which move had that disappeared? He shrugged. He'd been through a lot of them. He fondly touched an antenna as he went past the bookcase, along a narrow hall, and into the bedroom.

"My old iMac!" he exclaimed. But it wasn't old; the model had been out for less than a year. Bondi blue and ice case—to a taste formed in 2018, it looked not just outmoded but tacky as hell, but he'd thought it was great when it came out.

His younger self had left a note by the keyboard. *In case you don't re-*

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member, here's Megan's phone number and e-mail. Don't screw it up, that's all I've got to tell you.

He had remembered her e-mail address, but not her phone number. "Thanks, kid," he said to himself-at-twenty-one. There by the phone on the nightstand lay his younger self's address book, but having things out in the open made it easier.

Instead of calling her, he walked into the bathroom. His hand shook as he flipped on the light. He stared at the mirror. *Can I do this?* He ran a palm over his cheek. *Yeah, I look young. Do I look* that *young? What will Megan think when I come to the door? What will her folks think? I'm only a couple of years younger than they are, for Christ's sake.*

If I come to the door wearing his—my—clothes, though, and talking like me, and knowing things only I could know, who else would I be but Justin Kloster? She'll think I'm me, because I can't possibly be anybody else. And I'm not anybody else—except I am.

He was still frowning and looking for incipient wrinkles when the telephone rang. As he hurried back to the bedroom, he hoped it would be a telemarketer.

I'm not ready, I'm not ready, I'm not . . . "Hello?"

"Hiya? How the hell are you?" It was Megan, all right. He hadn't heard her in more than ten years, but he knew her voice. He hadn't heard her sound bouncy and bubbly and glad to be talking to *him* in a lot more than ten years. Before he could get a word in, she went on, "You mad at me? You haven't called in two days."

By the way she said it, it might have been two years. "I'm not mad," Justin answered automatically. "Just—busy."

"Too busy for *me?*" Now she sounded as if she couldn't imagine such a thing. Justin's younger self must have been too caught up in everything else to have time for her. At least he hadn't blabbed about Justin's return to 1999. "What were you doing? Who were you doing it with—or to?"

She giggled. Justin remembered her asking him questions like that later on, in an altogether different tone of voice. Not now. She didn't know she would do that. If he changed things here, she wouldn't. "Nothing," he said. "Nobody. Things have been hairy at work, that's all."

"A likely story." But Megan was still laughing. He remembered her doing things like that. He remembered her stopping, too. She said, "Well, you're not working now, right? Suppose I come over?"

"Okay," he said, thinking about baptism by total immersion. Either this would work, or it would blow up in his face. *What do I do if it blows up? Run back to 2018 with my tail between my legs, that's what.*

But Megan didn't even give him time to panic. "Okay?" she said, mock-fierce. "Okay? I'll okay you, mister, you see if I don't. Ten minutes." She hung up.

Justin ran around like a madman, to remind himself where things were and to clean up a little. He hadn't remembered his younger self as such a slob. He checked the refrigerator. Frozen dinners, beer, Cokes—about what he'd expected.

He waited for the buzz that would mean Megan was at the security door. But he'd forgotten he'd given her a key. The first indication that she was there was the knock on the door. He opened it. "Hi," he said, his voice breaking as if he really were twenty-one, or maybe sixteen.

"Hiya." Megan clicked her tongue between her teeth. "You do look tired. Poor baby."

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He was looking at her, too, looking and trying not to tremble. She looked just like all the photos he'd kept: a swarthy brunette with flashing dark eyes, a little skinny maybe, but with some meat on her bones even so. She always smiled as if she knew a secret. He'd remembered. Remembering and seeing it in the flesh when it was fresh and new and a long way from curdling were very different things. He hadn't imagined how different.

"How tired *are* you?" she said. "Not *too* tired, I hope." She stepped forward, put her arms around him, and tilted her face up.

Automatically, his arms went around her. Automatically, he brought his mouth down to hers. She made a tiny noise, deep in her throat, as their lips met.

Justin's heart pounded so hard, he was amazed Megan couldn't hear it. He wanted to burst into tears. Here he was, holding the only woman he'd ever truly loved, the woman who'd so emphatically stopped loving him—only now she did again. If that wasn't a miracle, he didn't know what was.

She felt soft and smooth and warm and firm. Very firm, he noticed—a lot firmer than the women he'd been seeing, no matter how obsessively they went to the gym. And that brought the second realization, almost as blinding as realizing he, Justin, was alone with her, Megan: he, a forty-year-old guy, was alone with her, a twenty-year-old girl.

What had the bartender asked? *You go around picking up high school girls?* But it wasn't like that, dammit. Megan didn't know he was forty. She thought he was his going-into-senior-year self. He had to think that way, too.

Except he couldn't, or not very well. He'd lived half a lifetime too long. He tried not to remember, but he couldn't help it. "Wow!" he gasped when the kiss finally ended.

"Yeah." Megan took such heat for granted. She was twenty. Doubt never entered her mind. "Not bad for starters." Without waiting for an answer, she headed for the bedroom.

Heart pounding harder than ever, Justin followed. Here-and-now, they hadn't been lovers very long, and neither had had a whole lot of experience beforehand. That was part of what had gone wrong; Justin was sure of it. They'd gone stale, without knowing how to fix things. Justin knew a lot more now than he had at twenty-one. And here he was, getting a chance to use it when it mattered.

He almost forgot everything the next instant, because Megan was getting out of her clothes and lying down on the bed and laughing at him for being so slow. He didn't stay slow very long. As he lay down beside her, he thanked God and Superstrings, Ltd., not necessarily in that order.

His hands roamed her. She sighed and leaned toward him for another kiss. *Don't hurry,* he thought. *Don't rush.* In a way, that was easy. He wanted to touch her, caress her, taste her, forever. In another way . . . he wanted to do more, too.

He made himself go slow. It was worth it. "Oh, Justin," Megan said. Some time later, she said, "Ohhh, Justin." He didn't think he'd ever heard her sound like that the first time around. What she said a few minutes after that had no words, but was a long way from disappointed.

Then it was his turn. He kept having the nagging thought that he was taking advantage of a girl half his age who didn't know exactly who he was. But then, as she clasped him with arms and legs, all the nagging thoughts went away. And it was just as good as he'd hoped it would be, which said a great deal.

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Afterward, they lay side by side, sweaty and smiling foolishly. Justin kept stroking her. She purred. She stroked him, too, expectantly. When what she was expecting didn't happen, she gave him a sympathetic look. "You *must* be tired," she said.

Did she think he'd be ready again right then? They'd just finished! But memory, now that he accessed it, told him she did. He clicked his tongue between his teeth. He might look about the same at forty as he had at twenty-one, but he couldn't perform the same. Who could?

If he had thought of this beforehand, he would have brought some Viagra back with him. In his time, it was over-the-counter. He wasn't even sure it existed in 1999. He hadn't had to worry about keeping it up, not at twenty-one.

But Megan had given him an excuse, at least this time. "Yeah, day from hell," he said. "Doesn't mean I can't keep you happy." He proceeded to do just that, and took his time about it, teasing her along as much as he could.

Once the teasing stopped, she stared at him, eyes enormous. "Oh, sweetie, why didn't you ever do anything like that before?" she asked. All by itself, the question made him sure he'd done the right thing, coming back. It also made him sure he needed to give his younger self a good talking-to before he slid up the superstring to 2018. But Megan found another question: "Where did you *learn* that?"

Did she think he had another girlfriend? Did she wonder if that was why he could only do it once with her? Or was she joking? He hoped she was. How would his younger self have answered? With pride. "I," he declared, "have a naturally dirty mind."

Megan giggled. "Good."

And it was good. A little later, in the lazy man's position, he managed a second round. That was very good. Megan thought so, too. He couldn't stop yawning afterward, but he'd already said he was tired. "See?" he told her. "You wear me out." He wasn't kidding. Megan didn't know how much he wasn't kidding.

She proved that, saying, "I was thinking we'd go to a club tonight, but I'd better put you to bed. We can go tomorrow." She went into the bathroom, then came back and started getting dressed. "We can do all sorts of things tomorrow." The smile she gave him wasn't just eager; it was downright lecherous.

Christ, he thought, *she'll expect me to be just as horny as I was tonight.* His younger self would have been. To him, the prospect seemed more nearly exhausting than exciting. *Sleep. I need sleep.*

Megan bent down and kissed him on the end of the nose. "Pick me up about seven? We'll go to the Probe, and then who knows what?"

"Okay," he said around another yawn. "Whatever." Megan laughed and left. Justin thought he heard her close the door, but he wasn't sure.

He couldn't even sleep late. He had to go do his younger self's job at CompUSA, and himself-at-twenty-one didn't keep coffee in the apartment. He drank Cokes instead, but they didn't pack the jolt of French roast.

Work was hell. All the computers were obsolete junk to him. Over half a lifetime, he'd forgotten their specs. Why remember when they were obsolete? And his boss, from the height of his late twenties, treated Justin like a kid. He wished he'd told his younger self to keep coming in. But Megan stopped by every so often, and so did other people he knew. He wanted himself-at-twenty-one out of sight, out of mind.

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His younger self probably *was* going out of his mind right now. He wondered what the kid was doing, what he was thinking. Worrying, he supposed, and dismissed himself-at-twenty-one as casually as his boss had dismissed him believing him to be his younger self.

His shift ended at five-fifteen. He drove home, nuked some supper, showered, and dressed in his younger self's club-hopping clothes: black pants and boots, black jacket, white shirt. The outfit struck him as stark. You needed to be skinny to look good in it, and he'd never been skinny. He shrugged. It was what you wore to go clubbing.

Knocking on the door to Megan's parents' house meant more strangeness. He made himself forget all the things they'd say after he and Megan went belly-up. And, when Megan's mother opened the door, he got another jolt: she looked pretty damn good. He'd always thought of her as old. "H-hello, Mrs. Tricoupis," he managed at last.

"Hello, Justin." She stepped aside. No, nothing old about her—somewhere close to his own age, sure enough. "Megan says you've been working hard."

"That's right." Justin nodded briskly.

"I believe it," Mrs. Tricoupis said. "You look tired." Megan had said the same thing. It was as close as they could come to *you look forty*. But her mother eyed him curiously. He needed a minute to figure out why: he'd spoken to her as an equal, not as his girlfriend's mother. *Gotta watch that,* he thought. It wouldn't be easy; he saw as much. Even if nobody else did, he knew how old he was.

Before he could say anything else to raise eyebrows, Megan came out. She fluttered her fingers at Mrs. Tricoupis. "See you later, Mom."

"All right," her mother said. "Drive safely, Justin."

"Yeah," he said. Nobody'd told him that in a long time. He grinned at Megan. "The Probe."

He'd had to look up how to get there in the Thomas Brothers himself-at-twenty-one kept in the car; he'd long since forgotten the address. It was off Melrose, the center of youth and style in the '90s—and as outmoded in 2018 as the corner of Haight and Ashbury in 1999.

On the way down, Megan said, "I hear there's going to be another rave at that place we went to a couple of weeks ago. Want to see?"

"Suppose." Justin hoped he sounded interested, not alarmed. After-hours illicit bashes didn't hold the attraction for him they once had. And he had no idea where they'd gone then. His younger self would know. He didn't.

He had as much trouble not grinning at the fashion statements the kids going into the club were making as Boomers did with tie-dye and suede jackets with fringe. Tattoos, pierced body parts . . . those fads had faded. Except for a stud in his left ear, he'd never had more holes than he'd been born with.

Somebody waved to Megan and him as they went in. He waved back. His younger self would have known who it was. He'd long since forgotten. He got away with it. And he got carded when he bought a beer. That made him laugh. Then he came back and bought another one for Megan, who wasn't legal yet.

She pointed toward the little booth with the spotlight on it. "Look. Helen's deejaying tonight. She's good!"

"Yeah." Justin grinned. Megan sounded so excited. Had he cared so passionately about who was spinning the music? He probably had. He won-

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dered why. The mix hadn't been that much different from one deejay to another.

When the music started, he thought the top of his head would blow off. Coming home with ears ringing had been a sign of a good time—and a sign of nerve damage, but who cared at twenty-one? He cared now.

"What's the matter?" Megan asked. "Don't you want to dance?" He thought that was what she said, anyhow; he read her lips, because he couldn't hear a word.

"Uh, sure." He hadn't been a great dancer at twenty-one, and hadn't been on the floor in a lot of years since. But Megan didn't criticize. She'd always liked getting out there and letting the music take over. The Probe didn't have a mosh pit, for which Justin was duly grateful. Looking back, pogoing in a pit reminded him more of line play at the Super Bowl than of dancing.

He hadn't been in great shape when he was twenty-one, either. Half a lifetime riding a desk hadn't improved things. By the time the first break came, he was blowing like a whale. Megan's face was sweaty, too, but she loved every minute of it. She wasn't even breathing hard. "This is *so* cool!" she said.

She was right. Justin had long since stopped worrying about whether he was cool. You could stay at the edge till you were thirty—thirty-five if you really pushed it. After that, you were either a fogy or a grotesque. He'd taken fogydom for granted for years. Now he had to ride the crest of the wave again. He wondered if it was worth it.

Helen started spinning more singles. Justin danced till one. At least he had the next day off. Even so, he wished he were home in bed—not with Megan but alone, blissfully unconscious. No such luck. Somebody with enough rings in his ears to set off airport metal detectors passed out Xeroxed directions to the rave. That told Justin where it was. He didn't want to go, but Megan did. "You wearing out on me?" she asked. They went.

He wondered who owned the warehouse—a big Lego block of a building—and if whoever it was had any idea what was going on inside. He doubted it. It was a dreadful place for a big party—concrete floor, wires and metal scaffolding overhead, acoustics worse than lousy. But Megan's eyes glowed. The thrill of the not quite legal. The cops might show up and throw everybody out.

He knew they wouldn't, not tonight, because they hadn't. And, at forty, the thrill of the not quite legal had worn off for him. Some smiling soul came by with little plastic bottles full of greenish liquid. "Instant Love!" he said. "Five bucks a pop."

Megan grabbed two. Justin knew he had to grab his wallet. "What's in it?" he asked warily.

"Try it. You'll like it," the guy said. "A hundred percent natural."

Megan had already gulped hers down. She waited expectantly for Justin. He remembered taking a lot of strange things at raves, but that had been a long time ago—except it wasn't. Nothing had killed him, so he didn't suppose this would.

And it didn't, but not from lack of trying. The taste was nasty plus sugar. The effect . . . when the shit kicked in, Justin stopped wishing for coffee. He felt as if he'd just had seventeen cups of the strongest joe ever perked. His heart pounded four hundred beats a minute. His hands shook. He could feel the veins on his eyeballs sticking out every time he blinked.

"Isn't it *great?*" Megan's eyes were bugging out of her head.

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"Whatever." When Justin was twenty-one, he'd thought this kind of rush was great, too. Now he wondered if he'd have a coronary on the spot. He did dance a lot more energetically.

And, when he took Megan back to his place, he managed something else, too. With his heart thudding the way it was, remembering anything related to foreplay wasn't easy, but he did. Had he been twenty-one, it surely would have been wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am. Megan seemed suitably appreciative; maybe that Instant Love handle wasn't altogether hype.

But his real age told. Despite the drug, whatever it was, and despite the company, he couldn't have gone a second round if he'd had a crane to get it up. If that bothered Megan, she didn't let on.

Despite his failure, he didn't roll over and go to sleep, the way he had the first night. He wondered if he'd sleep for the next week. It was past four in the morning. "Shall I take you home?" he asked. "Your folks gonna be worried?"

Megan sat up naked on the bed and shook her head. Everything moved when she did that; it was marvelous to watch. "No problem," she said. "They aren't on me twenty-four-seven like some parents. You don't want to throw me out, I'd just as soon stay a while." She opened her eyes very wide to show she wasn't sleepy, either.

"Okay. Better than okay." Justin reached out and brushed the tip of her left breast with the backs of his fingers. "I like having you around, you know?" She had no idea how much he wanted to have her around. With luck, she'd never find out.

"I like being around." She cocked her head to one side. "You've been kind of funny the last couple days, you know?"

To cover his unease—hell, his fear—Justin made a stupid face. "Is that funny enough for you?" he asked.

"Not funny like that," Megan said. He made a different, even more stupid, face. It got a giggle from her, but she persisted: "Not funny like that, I told you. Funny a different sort of way."

"Like how?" he asked, though he knew.

Megan didn't, but groped toward it: "Lots of little things. The way you touch me, for instance. You didn't used to touch me like that." She looked down at the wet spot on the sheets. "I like what you're doing, believe me I do, but it's not what you were doing last week. How did you . . . find this out, just all of a sudden? It's great, like I say, but . . ." She shrugged. "I shouldn't complain. I'm *not* complaining. But . . ." Her voice trailed off again.

If I'd known then what I know now—everybody sang that song. But he didn't just sing it. He'd done something about it. This was the thanks he got? At least she hadn't come right out and asked him if he had another girlfriend.

He tried to make light of it: "Here I spent all night laying awake, trying to think of things you'd like, and—"

"I do," Megan said quickly. She wasn't lying, not unless she was the best actress in the world. But she went on, "You looked bored in the Probe tonight. You never looked bored in a club before."

Damn. He hadn't known it showed. What was hot at twenty-one wasn't at forty. *Been there, done that.* That was what people said in the '90s. One more thing he couldn't admit. "Tired," he said again.

Megan nailed him for it. "You never said that, either, not till yesterday—day before yesterday now." Remorselessly precise.

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"Sorry," Justin answered. "I'm just me. Who else would I be?" Again, he was conscious of knowing what she didn't and keeping it from her. It felt unkosher, as if he were the only one in class who took a test with the book open. But what else could he do?

Megan started getting into her clothes. "Maybe you'd better take me home." But then, as if she thought that too harsh, she added some teasing: "I don't want to eat what you'd fix for breakfast."

He could have made her a damn fine breakfast. He started to say so. But his younger self couldn't have, not to save his life. He shut up and got dressed, too. Showing her more differences was the last thing he wanted.

Dawn was turning the eastern sky gray and pink when he pulled up in front of her parents' house. Before she could take off her seat belt, he put his arm around her and said, "I love you, you know?"

His younger self wouldn't say those words for another year. *Taking my time,* the socially backward dummy called it. For Justin at forty, the words weren't just a truth, but a truth that defined his life—for better and, later on, for worse. He had no trouble bringing them out.

Megan stared at him. Maybe she hadn't expected him to say that for quite a while yet. After a heartbeat, she nodded. She leaned over and kissed him, half on the cheek, half on the mouth. Then she got out and walked to her folks' front door. She turned and waved. Justin waved back. He drove off while she was working the deadbolt.

He finally fell asleep about noon. The Instant Love had kept him up and bouncing till then. At two-thirty, the phone rang. By the way he jerked and thrashed, a bomb might have gone off by his head. He grabbed the handset, feeling like death. "Hello?" he croaked.

"Hi. How are things?"

Not Megan. A man's voice. For a second, all that meant was that it didn't matter, that he could hang up on it. Then he recognized it: the voice on his own answering machine. But it wasn't a recording. It was live, which seemed more than he could say right now. His younger self.

He had to talk, dammit. "Things are fine," he said. "Or they were till you called. I was asleep."

"*Now?*" The way himself-at-twenty-one sounded, it might have been some horrible perversion. "I called now 'cause I figured you wouldn't be."

"Never mind," Justin said. The cobwebs receded. He knew they'd be back pretty soon. "Yeah, things are okay. We went to the Probe last night, and—"

"*Did* you?" His younger self sounded—no, *suspicious* wasn't right. *Jealous.* That was it. "What else did you do?"

"That after-hours place. Some guy came through with fliers, so I knew how to get there."

"Lucky you. And what *else* did you do?" Yeah. Jealous. A-number-one jealous.

Justin wondered how big a problem that would be. "About what you'd expect," he answered tightly. "I'm you, remember. What would you have done?"

The sigh on the other end of the line said his younger self knew exactly what he would have done, and wished he'd been doing it. *But I did it better, you little geek.*

Before his younger self could do anything but sigh, Justin added, "And when I took her home, I told her I loved her."

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"Jesus!" himself-at-twenty-one exclaimed. "What did you go and do that for?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

"That doesn't mean you've got to *say* it, for Christ's sake," his younger self told him. "What am I supposed to do when you go away?"

"Marry her, doofus," Justin said. "Live happily ever after, so I get to live happily ever after, too. Why the hell do you think I came back here?"

"For your good time, man, not mine. I'm sure not having a good time, I'll tell you."

Was I really that stupid? Justin wondered. But it wasn't quite the right question. *Was my event horizon that short?* Holding on to patience with both hands, he said, "Look, chill for a while, okay? I'm doing fine."

"Sure you are." His younger self sounded hot. "You're doing fucking great. What about me?"

Nope, no event horizon at all. Justin said, "You're fine. Chill. You're on vacation. Go ahead. Relax. Spend my money. That's what it's there for."

That distracted his younger self. "Where'd you get so much? What did you do, rob a bank?"

"It's worth a lot more now than it will be then," Justin answered. "Inflation. Have some fun. Just be discreet, okay?"

"You mean, keep out of your hair." His younger self didn't stay distracted long.

"In a word, yes."

"While you're in Megan's hair." Himself-at-twenty-one let out a long, angry breath. "I don't know, dude."

"It's for you." Justin realized he was pleading. "It's for her and you."

Another angry exhalation. "Yeah." His younger self hung up.

Everything went fine till he took Megan to the much ballyhooed summer blockbuster two weekends later. She'd been caught up in the hype. And she thought the leading man was cute, though he looked like a boy to Justin. On the other hand, Justin looked like a boy himself, or he couldn't have gotten away with this.

But that wasn't the worst problem. Unlike her, he'd seen the movie before. He remembered liking it, though he'd thought the plot a little thin. Seen through forty-year-old eyes, it had no plot at all. He had a lot less tolerance for loud soundtracks and things blowing up every eight and a half minutes than his younger self would have. And even the most special special effects seemed routine to somebody who'd been through another twenty years of computer-generated miracles.

As the credits finally rolled, he thought, *No wonder I don't go to the movies much any more.*

When Megan turned to him, though, her eyes were shining. "Wasn't that great?" she said as they headed for the exit.

"Yeah," he said. "Great."

A different tone would have saved him. He realized that as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Too late. The one he'd used couldn't have been anything but sarcastic. And Megan noticed. She was good at catching things like that—better than he'd ever been, certainly. "What's the matter?" she demanded. "Why didn't you like it?"

The challenge in her voice reminded Justin of how she'd sounded during the quarrels before their breakup. She couldn't know that. His younger self

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wouldn't have known, either—he hadn't been through it. But Justin had, and reacted with a challenge of his own: "Why? Because it was really dumb."

It was a nice summer night, clear, cooling down from the hot day, a few stars in the sky—with the lights of the San Fernando Valley, you never saw more than a few. None of that mattered to Megan. She stopped halfway to the car. "How can you say that?"

Justin saw the special-effects stardust in her eyes, and the effect of a great many close-ups of the boyishly handsome—pretty, to his newly jaundiced eye—leading man. He should have shut up. But he reacted viscerally to that edge in her voice. Instead of letting things blow over, he told her exactly why the movie was dumb.

He finished just as they got to the Toyota. He hadn't let her get in word one. When he ran down, she stared at him. "Why are you so mean? You never sounded so mean before."

"You asked. I told you," he said, still seething. But when he saw her fighting back tears as she fastened her seat belt, he realized he'd hit back too hard. It wasn't quite like kicking a puppy, but it was close, too close. He had a grown man's armor, and weapons to pierce a grown woman's—all the nastier products of experience—and he'd used them on a kid. Too late, he felt like an asshole. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Whatever." Megan looked out the window toward the theater complex, not at him. "Maybe you'd better take me home."

Alarm tore through him. "Honey, I said I was sorry. I meant it."

"I heard you." Megan still wouldn't look at him. "You'd better take me home anyhow."

Sometimes, the more you argued, the bigger the mess you made. This looked like one of those times. Justin recognized that now. A couple of minutes sooner would have been better. "Okay," he said, and started the car.

The ride back to her folks' house was almost entirely silent. When he pulled up, Megan opened the door before the car stopped rolling. "Good night," she said. She started for the front door at something nearly a run.

"Wait!" he called. If that wasn't raw panic in his voice, it would do. She heard it, too, and stopped, looking back warily, like a frightened animal that *would* bolt at any wrong move. He said, "I won't do that again. Promise." To show how much he meant it, he crossed his heart. He hadn't done that since about the third grade.

Megan's nod was jerky. "All right," she said. "But don't call me for a while anyway. We'll both chill a little. How does that sound?"

Terrible. Justin hated the idea of losing any precious time here. But he saw he couldn't argue. He wished he'd seen that sooner. He made himself nod, made himself smile, made himself say, "Okay."

The porch light showed relief on Megan's face. Relief she wouldn't be talking to him for a while. He had to live with that all the way home.

He wished he could have walked away from his younger self's job at CompUSA, but it would have looked bad. He'd needed a few days to have the details of late-1990s machines come back to him. Once they did, he rapidly got a reputation as a maven. His manager bumped him a buck an hour—and piled more hours on him. He resisted as best he could, but he couldn't always.

Three days after the fight with Megan, his phone rang as he got into

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his—well, his younger self's—apartment. He got to it just before the answering machine could. "Hello?" He was panting. If it was himself-at-twenty-one, he was ready to contemplate murder—or would it be suicide?

But it was Megan. "Hiya," she said. "Didn't I ask you not to call for a little bit? I know I did."

"Yeah, you did. And I—" Justin broke off. *He* hadn't called her. What about his younger self? *Maybe I ought to rub him out, if he's going to mess things up.* But that thought vanished. He couldn't deny a conversation she'd surely had. "I just like talking to you, that's all."

Megan's laughter was rainbows to his ears. "You were *so* funny," she said. "It was like we hadn't fought at all. I couldn't stay pissed. Believe me, I tried."

"I'm glad you didn't," Justin said. *And I* do *need to have a talk with my younger self.* "You want to go out this weekend?"

"Sure," Megan answered. "But let's stay away from the movies. What do you think?"

"Whatever," he said. "Okay with me."

"Good." More relief. "Plenty of other things we can do. Maybe I should just come straight to your place."

His younger self would have slavered at that. He liked the idea pretty well himself. But, being forty and not twenty-one, he heard what Megan didn't say, too. What she meant, or some of what she meant, was, *You're fine in bed. Whenever we're not in bed, whenever we go somewhere, you get weird.*

"Sure," he said, and then, to prove he wasn't only interested in her body, he went on, "Let's go to Sierra's and stuff ourselves full of tacos and enchiladas. How's that?"

"Fine," Megan said.

Justin thought it sounded fine, too. Sierra's was a Valley institution. It had been there since twenty years before he was born, and would still be going strong in 2018. He didn't go there often then; he had too many memories of coming there with Megan. Now those memories would turn from painful to happy. That was why he was here. Smiling, he said, "See you Saturday, then."

"Yeah," Megan said. Justin's smile got bigger.

Ring. Ring. Ring. "Hello?" his younger self said.

"Oh, good," Justin said coldly. "You're home."

"Oh. It's you." Himself-at-twenty-one didn't sound delighted to hear from him, either. "No, *you're* home. I'm stuck here."

"Didn't I tell you to lay low till I was done here?" Justin demanded. "God damn it, you'd better listen to me. I just had to pretend I knew what Megan was talking about when she said I'd been on the phone with her."

"She's my girl, too," his younger self said. "She was my girl first, you know. I've got a *right* to talk with her."

"Not if you want her to keep being your girl, you don't," Justin said. "You're the one who's going to screw it up, remember?"

"That's what you keep telling me," his younger self answered. "But you know what? I'm not so sure I believe you any more. When I called her, Megan sounded like she was really torqued at me—at you, I mean. So it doesn't sound like you've got all the answers, either."

"*Nobody* has *all* the answers," Justin said with such patience as he could muster. He didn't think he'd believed that at twenty-one; at forty, he was

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convinced it was true. He was convinced something else was true, too: "If you think you've got more of them than I do, you're full of shit."

"You want to be careful how you talk to me," himself-at-twenty-one said. "Half the time, I still think your whole setup is bogus. If I decide to, I can wreck it. You know damn well I can."

Justin knew only too well. It scared the crap out of him. But he didn't dare show his younger self he was afraid. As sarcastically as he could, he said, "Yeah, go ahead. Screw up your life for good. Keep going like this and you will."

"You sound pretty screwed up now," his younger self said. "What have I got to lose?"

"I had something good, and I let it slip through my fingers," Justin said. "That's enough to mess anybody up. You wreck what I'm doing now, you'll go through life without knowing what a good thing was. You want that? Just keep sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong. You want to end up with Megan or not?"

Where nothing else had, that hit home. "All right," his younger self said sullenly. "I'll back off—for now." He hung up. Justin stared at the phone, cursed, and put it back in its cradle.

Megan looked at her empty plate as if she couldn't imagine how it had got that way. Then she looked at Justin. "Did I really eat all that?" she said. "Tell me I didn't really eat all that."

"Can't do it," he said solemnly.

"Oh, my God!" Megan said: not Valley-girl nasal but sincerely astonished. "All those refried beans! They'll go straight to my thighs."

"No, they won't." Justin spoke with great certainty. For as long as he'd known—would know—Megan, her weight hadn't varied by more than five pounds. He'd never heard that she'd turned into a blimp after they broke up, either. He lowered his voice. "I like your thighs."

She raised a dark eyebrow, as if to say, *You're a guy. If I let you get between them, of course you like them.* But the eyebrow came down. "You talk nice like that, maybe you'll get a chance to prove it. Maybe."

"Okay." Justin's plate was as empty as hers. Loading up on heavy Mexican food hadn't slowed him down when he was twenty-one. Now it felt like a bowling ball in his stomach. But he figured he'd manage. Figuring that, he left a bigger tip than he would have otherwise.

The waiter scooped it up. "*Gracias, señor.*" He sounded unusually sincere.

Driving north up Canoga Avenue toward his place, Justin used a sentence that had the phrase "after we're married" in it.

Megan had been looking at the used car lot across the street. Her head whipped around. "After we're what?" she said. "Not so fast, there."

For the very first time, Justin thought to wonder whether his younger self knew what he was doing when he took another year to get around to telling Megan he loved her. He now had the advantage of hindsight; he knew he and Megan would walk down the aisle. But Megan didn't know it. Right this minute, she didn't sound delighted with the idea.

Worse, Justin couldn't explain that he knew, or how he knew. "I just thought—" he began.

Megan shook her head. Her dark hair flipped back and forth. She said, "No. You didn't think. You're starting your senior year this fall. I'm starting my junior year. We aren't ready to think about getting married yet,

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even if . . ." She shook her head again. "We aren't ready. What would we live on?"

"We'd manage." Justin didn't want to think about that *even if.* It had to be the start of something like, *even if I decide I want to marry you.* But Megan hadn't said all of it. Justin clung to that. He had nothing else to cling to.

"We'd manage?" Megan said. "Yeah, right. We'd go into debt so deep, we'd never get out. I don't want to do that, not when I'm just starting. I didn't think you did, either."

He kept driving for a little while. Clichés had women eager for commitment and men fleeing from it as if from a skunk at a picnic. He'd gone and offered to commit, and Megan reacted as if he ought to be committed. What did that say about clichés? Probably not to pay much attention to them.

"Hey." Megan touched his arm. "I'm not mad, not for that. But I'm not ready, either. Don't push me, okay?"

"Okay." But Justin had to push. He knew it too damn well. He couldn't stay in 1999 very long. Things between Megan and him had to be solid before he left the scene and his younger self took over again. His younger self, he was convinced, could fuck up a wet dream, and damn well had fucked up what should have been a perfect, lifelong relationship.

He opened the window and clicked the security key into the lock. The heavy iron gate slid open. He drove in and parked the car. They both got out. Neither said much as they walked to his apartment.

Not too much later, in the dark quiet of the bedroom, Megan clutched the back of his head with both hands and cried out, "Ohhh, Justin!" loud enough to make him embarrassed to show his face to the neighbors—or make him a minor hero among them, depending. She lay back on the bed and said, "You drive me crazy when you do that."

"We aim to please." Did he sound smug? If he did, hadn't he earned the right?

Megan laughed. "Bull's-eye!" Her voice still sounded shaky.

He slid up to lie beside her, running his hands along her body as he did. *Strike while the iron is hot,* he thought. He felt pretty hot himself. He said, "And you don't want to talk about getting married yet?"

"I don't want to talk about anything right now," Megan said. "What I want to do is . . ." She did it. If Justin hadn't been a consenting adult, it would have amounted to criminal assault. As things were, he couldn't think of any stretch of time he'd enjoyed more.

"Jesus, I love you," he said when he was capable of coherent speech.

Megan kept straddling him—not that he wanted to escape. Her face was only a couple of inches above his. Now she leaned down and kissed him on the end of the nose. "I love this," she said, which wasn't the same thing at all.

He ran a hand along the smooth, sweat-slick curves of her back. "Well, then," he said, as if the two things were the same.

She laughed and shook her head. Her hair brushed back and forth across his face, full of the scent of her. Even though she kissed him again, she said, "But we can't do this all the time." At that precise moment, he softened and flopped out of her. She nodded, as if he'd proved her point. "See what I mean?"

Justin wished for his younger self's body. Had himself-at-twenty-one been there, he would have been hard at it again instead of wilting at the worst possible time. But he had to play the hand he'd been dealt. He said, "I

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know it's not the only reason to get married, but isn't it a nice one?" To show how nice it was, he slid his hand between her legs.

Megan let it stay there for a couple of seconds, but then twisted away. "I asked you not to push me about that, Justin," she said, all the good humor gone from her voice.

"Well, yeah, but—" he began.

"You didn't listen," she said. "People who get married have to, like, listen to each other, too, you know? You can't just screw all the time. You really can't. Look at my parents, for crying out loud."

"*My* parents are screwing all the time," Justin said.

"Yeah, but not with each other." Megan hesitated, then said, "I'm sorry."

"Why? It's true." Justin's younger self had been horrified at his parents' antics. If anything, that horror had gotten worse since. Up in 2018, he hadn't seen or even spoken to either one of them for years, and he didn't miss them, either.

Then he thought, *So Dad chases bimbos and Mom decided she wasn't straight after all. What you're doing here is a lot weirder than any of that.* But was it? All he wanted was a happy marriage, one like Megan's folks had, one that probably looked boring from the outside but not when you were in it.

Was that too much to ask? The way things were going, it was liable to be.

Megan said, "Don't get me wrong, Justin. I like you a lot. I wouldn't go to bed with you if I didn't. Maybe I even love you, if you want me to say that. But I don't know if I want to try and spend my whole life with you. And if you keep riding me twenty-four-seven about it, I'll decide I don't. Does that make any sense to you?"

Justin shook his head. All he heard was a clock ticking on his hopes. "If we've got a good thing going, we ought to take it as far as we can," he said. "Where will we find anything better?" He'd spent the rest of his life looking not for something better but for something close to as good. He hadn't found it.

"Goddammit, it's not a good thing if you won't listen to me. You don't want to notice that." Megan got up and went into the bathroom. When she came back, she started dressing. "Take me home, please."

"Shouldn't we talk some more?" Justin heard the panic in his own voice.

"No. Take me home." Megan sounded very sure. "Every time we talk lately, you dig the hole deeper for yourself. Like I said, Justin, I like you, but I don't think we'd better talk for a while. It's like you don't even hear me, like you don't even have to hear me. Like you're the grownup and I'm just a kid to you, and I don't like that a bit."

How seriously did a forty-year-old need to take a twenty-year-old? Unconsciously, Justin must have decided, *not very*. That looked to be wrong. "Honey, please wait," he said.

"It'll just get worse if I do," she answered. "Will you drive me, or shall I call my dad?"

He was in Dutch with her. He didn't want to get in Dutch with her folks, too. "I'll drive you," he said dully.

Even more than the drive back from the movie theater had, this one passed in tense silence. At last, as Justin turned onto her street, Megan broke it: "We've got our whole lives ahead of us, you know? The way you've been going lately, it's like you want everything nailed down tomorrow. That's not gonna happen. It can't happen. Neither one of us is ready for it."

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"I am," Justin said.

"Well, I'm not," Megan told him as he stopped the car in front of her house. "And if you keep picking at it and picking at it, I'm never going to be. In fact . . ."

"In fact, what?"

"Never mind," she said. "Whatever." Before he could ask her again, she got out and hurried up the walk toward the house. He waved to her. He blew her a kiss. She didn't look back to see the wave or the kiss. She just opened the door and went inside. Justin sat for a couple of minutes, staring at the house. Then, biting his lip, he drove home.

Over the next three days, he called Megan a dozen times. Every time, he got the answering machine or one of her parents. They kept telling him she wasn't home. At last, fed up, he burst out, "She doesn't want to talk to me!"

Her father would have failed as White House press secretary. All he said was, "Well, if she doesn't, you can't make her, you know"—hardly a ringing denial.

But that's what I came back for! Justin wanted to scream it. That wouldn't have done any good. He knew as much. He still wanted to scream it. He'd come back to make things better, and what had he done? Made them worse.

On the fourth evening, the telephone rang as he walked in the door from his shift at CompUSA. His heart sank as he hurried into the bedroom. His younger self would be flipping out if he'd tried to call Megan and discovered she wouldn't talk to him. He'd told his younger self not to do that, but how reliable was himself-at-twenty-one? Not very. "Hello?"

"Hello, Justin." It wasn't his younger self. It was Megan.

"Hi!" He didn't know whether to be exalted or terrified. Not knowing, he ended up both at once. "How are you?"

"I'm okay." She paused. Terror swamped exaltation. When she went on, she said, "I've been talking with my folks the last few days."

That didn't sound good. Trying to pretend he didn't know how bad it sounded, he asked, "And?" The word hung in the air.

Megan paused again. At last, she said, "We—I've—decided I'd better not see you any more. I'm sorry, Justin, but that's how things are."

"They're making you say that!" If Justin blamed Megan's parents, he wouldn't have to blame anyone else: himself, for instance.

But she said; "No, they aren't. My mom, especially, thought I ought to give you another chance. But I've given you a couple chances already, and you don't know what to do with them. Things got way too intense way too fast, and I'm not ready for that. I don't want to deal with it, and I don't have to deal with it, and I'm not going to deal with it, and that's that. Like I said, I'm sorry and everything, but I can't."

"I don't believe this," he muttered. Refusing to believe it remained easier than blaming himself. "What about the sex?"

"It was great," Megan said at once. "I won't tell you any lies. If you make other girls feel the way you make—*made*—me feel, you won't have any trouble finding somebody else. I hope you do."

Christ, Justin thought. *She's letting me down easy. She's trying to, anyhow, but she's only twenty and she's not very good at it.* He didn't want to be let down easy, or at all. He said, "What about you?"

"I'll keep looking. If you can do it for me, probably other fellows can, too," Megan answered with devastating pragmatism. Half to herself, she added,

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"Maybe I need to date older guys, or something, if I can find some who aren't too bossy."

That would have been funny, if only it were funny. Justin whispered, "But I love you. I've always loved you." He'd loved her for about as long as she'd been alive here in 1999. What did he have to show for it? Getting shot down in flames not once but twice.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be. Please?" Megan said. "And don't call here any more, okay? You're not going to change my mind. If I decide I was wrong, I'll call your place, all right? Goodbye, Justin." She hung up without giving him a chance to answer.

Don't call us. We'll call you. Everybody knew what that meant. It meant what she'd been telling him anyhow: so long. He didn't want to hang up. Finally, after more than a minute of dial tone, he did.

"What do I do now?" he asked himself, or possibly God. God might have known. Justin had no clue.

He thought about calling his younger self and letting him know things had gone wrong: he thought about it for maybe three seconds, then dropped the idea like a live grenade. Himself-at-twenty-one would want to slaughter him. He metaphorically felt like dying, but not for real.

Why not? he wondered. *What will it be like when you head back to your own time? You wanted to change the past. Well, you've done that. You've screwed it up bigtime. What kind of memories will you have when you come back to that men's room in 2018? Not memories of being married to Megan for a while and then having things go sour, that's for sure. You don't even get those. It'll be nineteen years of nothing—a long, lonely, empty stretch.*

He lay down on the bed and wept. He hadn't done that since Megan told him she was leaving him. *Since the last time Megan told me she was leaving me,* he thought. Hardly noticing he'd done it, he fell asleep.

When the phone rang a couple of hours later, Justin had trouble remembering when he was and how old he was supposed to be. The old-fashioned computer on the desk told him everything he needed to know. Grimacing, he picked up the telephone. "Hello?"

"You son of a bitch." His younger self didn't bellow the words. Instead, they were deadly cold. "You goddamn stupid, stinking, know-it-all son of a bitch."

Since Justin was calling himself the same things, he had trouble getting angry when his younger self cursed him. "I'm sorry," he said. "I tried to—"

He might as well have kept quiet. His younger self rode over him, saying, "I just tried calling Megan. She said she didn't want to talk to me. She said she never wanted to talk to me again. She said she'd told me she never wanted to talk to me again, so what was I doing on the phone right after she told me that? Then she hung up on me."

"I'm sorry," Justin repeated. "I—"

"Sorry?" This time, his younger self did bellow. "You think you're sorry now? You don't know what sorry is, but you will. I'm gonna beat the living shit out of you, dude. Fuck up my life, will you? You think you can get away with that, you're full of—" He slammed down the phone.

Justin had never been much for fisticuffs, not at twenty-one and not at forty, either. But his younger self was so furious now, who could guess what he'd do? What with rage and what had to be a severe case of testosterone poisoning, he was liable to mean what he'd said. Justin knew to the day how many years he was giving away.

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He also knew his younger self had keys to this apartment. If himself-at-twenty-one showed up here in fifteen minutes, did he want to meet him?

That led to a different question: did he want to be here in 1999 at all any more? All he'd done was the opposite of what he'd wanted. Why hang around, then? Instead of waiting to slide back along the superstring into 2018 in a few more weeks, wasn't it better to cut the string and go back to his own time, to try to pick up the pieces of whatever life would be left to him after he'd botched things here?

Justin booted up the PowerBook from his own time. The suitcases he'd brought to 1999 were at the other apartment. So was a lot of the cash. His mouth twisted. He didn't think he could ask his younger self to return it.

As he slipped the VR mask onto his head, he hoped he'd done his homework right, and that he would return to the men's room from which he'd left 2018. That was what his calculations showed, but how good were they? Only real experience would tell. If this building still stood then and he materialized in somebody's bedroom, he'd have more explaining to do than he really wanted.

He also wondered what memories he'd have when he got back to his former point on the timeline. The old ones, as if he hadn't made the trip? The old ones, plus his memories of seeing 1999 while forty? New ones, stemming from the changes he'd made back here? Some of each? He'd find out.

From its initial perfect blankness, the VR mask view shifted to show the room in which he now sat, PowerBook on his lap. "Run program superstrings-slash-virtual reality-slash-not so virtual-slash-reverse," he said. The view began to shift. Part of that was good old-fashioned morphing software, so what he saw in the helmet looked less and less like this bedroom and more and more like the restroom that was his destination. And part was the superstring program, pulling him from one point on the string to the other. He hoped part of it was the superstring software, anyhow. If the program didn't run backward, he'd have to deal with his angry younger self, and he wasn't up to that physically or mentally.

On the VR screen, the men's room at the Superstrings building had completely replaced the bedroom of his younger self's apartment. "Program superstrings-slash-virtual reality-slash-not so virtual reality-slash-reverse is done," the PowerBook said. Justin kept waiting. If he took off the helmet and found himself still in that bedroom. . . .

When he nerved himself to shed the mask, he let out a long, loud sigh of relief: what he saw without it matched what he'd seen with it. His next worry—his mind coughed them up in carload lots—was that he'd gone to the right building, but in 1999, not 2018.

His first step out of the men's room reassured him. The carpeting was its old familiar color, not the jarring one from 1999. He looked at the VR mask and PowerBook he was carrying. He wouldn't need them any more today, and he didn't feel like explaining to Sean and Garth and everybody else why he'd brought them. He headed downstairs again, to stow them in the trunk of his car.

As he walked through the lobby toward the front door, the security guard opened it for him. "Forget something, sir?" the aging Boomer asked.

"Just want to put this stuff back, Bill." Justin held up the laptop and mask. Nodding, the guard stepped aside.

Justin was halfway across the lot before he realized the car toward which

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he'd aimed himself wasn't the one he'd parked there before going back to 1999. It was in the same space, but it wasn't the same car. He'd driven here in an aging Ford, not a top-of-the-line Volvo.

He looked around the lot. No Ford. No cars but the Volvo and Bill's ancient, wheezing Hyundai. If he hadn't got here in the Volvo, how had he come? Of itself, his hand slipped into his trouser pocket and came out with a key ring. The old iron ring and the worn leather fob on it were familiar; he'd had that key ring a long time. The keys . . .

One was a Volvo key. He tried it in the trunk. It turned in the lock. Smoothly, almost silently, the lid opened. Justin put the computer and the VR mask in the trunk, closed it, and slid the keys back into his pants pocket.

They weren't the pants he'd worn when he left his apartment that morning: instead of 1990s-style baggy jeans, they were slacks, a lightweight wool blend. His shoes had changed, too, and he was wearing a nice polo shirt, not a Dilbert T-shirt.

He ran his left hand over the top of his head. His hair was longer, the buzz cut gone. He started to wonder if he was really himself. His memories of what he'd been before he went back and changed his own past warred with the ones that had sprung from the change. He shook his head; his brain felt overcrowded.

He started back toward the Superstrings building, but wasn't ready to go in there again quite yet. He needed to sit down somewhere quiet for a while and straighten things out inside his own mind.

When he looked down the street, he grinned. There was the Denny's where he'd had breakfast right after going back to 1999. It hadn't changed much in the years since. He sauntered over. He was still on his own time.

"Toast and coffee," he told the middle-aged, bored-looking Hispanic waitress.

"White, rye, or whole wheat?"

"Wheat," he answered.

"Yes, sir," she said. She brought them back with amazing speed. He smeared the toast with grape jelly, let her refill his cup two or three times, and then, still bemused but caffeinated, headed back to Superstrings, Ltd.

More cars in the lot now, and still more pulling in as he walked up. There was Garth O'Connell's garish green Chevy. Justin waved. "Morning, Garth. How you doing?"

O'Connell smiled. "Not too bad. How are you, Mr. Kloster?"

"Could be worse," Justin allowed. Part of him remembered Garth being on a first-name basis with him. The other part, the increasingly dominant part, insisted that had never happened.

They went inside and upstairs together, talking business. Garth headed off into the maze of cubicles that made up most of the second floor. Justin started to follow him, but his feet didn't want to go that way. He let them take him where they would. They had a better idea of where exactly he worked than his conscious mind did right now.

His secretary was already busy at the computer in the anteroom in front of his office. She nodded. "Good morning, Mr. Kloster."

"Good morning, Brittany," he said. Had he ever seen her in all his life? If he hadn't, how did he know her name? How did he know she'd worked for him the past three years?

He went into the office—*his* office—and closed the door. Again, he had that momentary disorientation, as if he'd never been here before. But of

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course he had. If the founder and president of Superstrings, Ltd., didn't deserve the fanciest office in the building, who did?

The part of him that had traveled back through time still felt confused. Not the rest, the part that had been influenced by his trip back to 1999. Knowing such things were possible—and having the seed money his time-traveling self left behind—wouldn't he naturally have started getting involved in this area as soon as he could? Sure he would have—he damn well had. On the wall of the office, framed, hung, not the first dollar he'd ever made, but a quarter dated 2012. He'd had it for nineteen years.

He sat down at his desk. The view out the window wasn't much, but it beat the fuzzy, grayish-tan wall of a cubicle. On the desk stood a framed picture of a smiling blond woman and two boys he'd never seen before—his sons, Saul and Lije. When he stopped and thought, it all came back to him, just as if he'd really lived it. As a matter of fact, he had. *He'd* never got over Megan. His younger self, who'd never married her, was a different story—from the way things looked, a better story.

Why, he even knew how the image had been ever so slightly edited. She could be vain about the silliest things. His phone buzzed. He picked it up. "Yes, Brittany?"

"Your wife's on the line, Mr. Kloster," his secretary said. "Something she wants you to get on the way home."

"Sure, put her through." Justin was still chuckling when his wife came on the line. "Okay, what do you need at the store, Lindsey?" O

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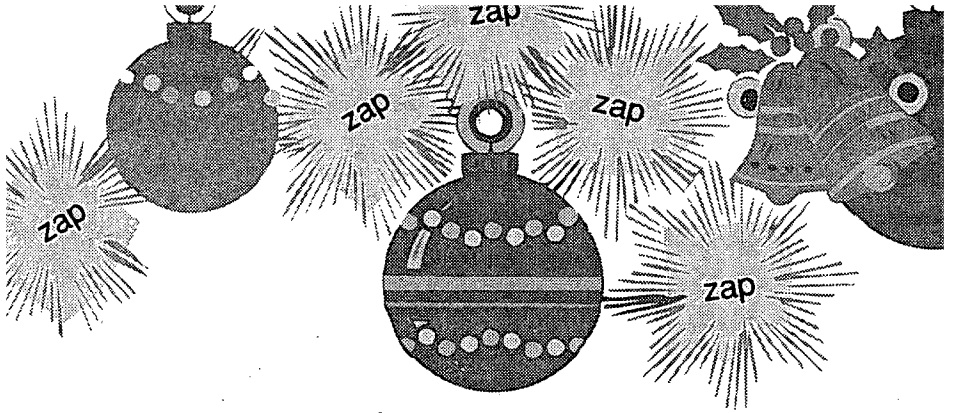


CHRISTMAS

(after we all get time machines)

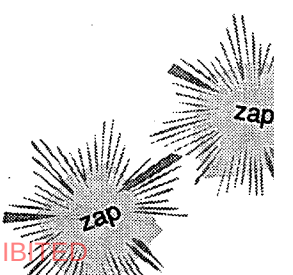
Time machines, when they finally get invented,
will be a real disappointment.
Turns out, you can't go backward
—no trips to see Lincoln or the first Christmas
Only forward.

Soon they will be novelty items in the Sharper Image catalog,
then Spencer Gifts
then K-mart
On sale this week only
(batteries not included)

Hiding Christmas gifts will become a snap:
No worry of junior sniffing out the hiding places.
Wrap it,
put it where the tree will be and
/zap/
to December 24, 11:59 P.M.

Cleaning up Christmas decorations will be easy.
No need for a storage closet for sleds and lights and holiday
socks the paperweights with Frosty and Rudolph
aim your time-zapper, and
/zap/
/zap/
/zap/
they're gone,
back next December

reuse your wrapping paper,



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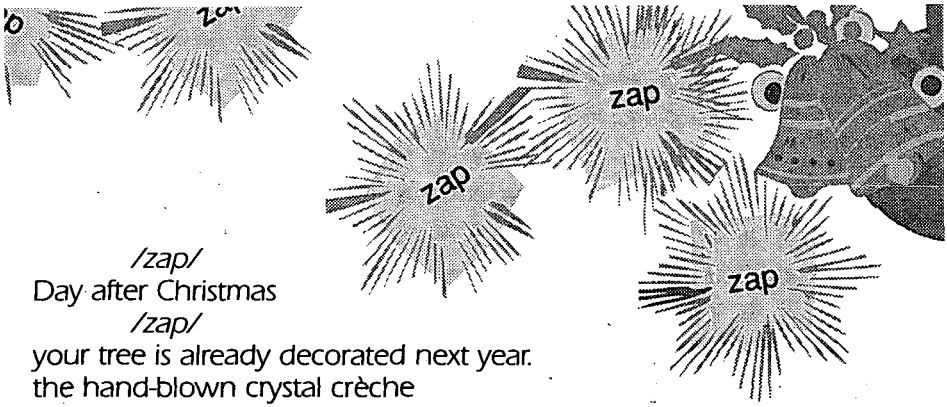
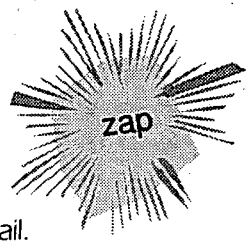


/zap/
Day after Christmas
/zap/
your tree is already decorated next year.
the hand-blown crystal crèche
/zap/
(Don't move the furniture!
That table had better be in the same place next year!)

Snow? Why shovel?
/zap/
the kids will love it in August,

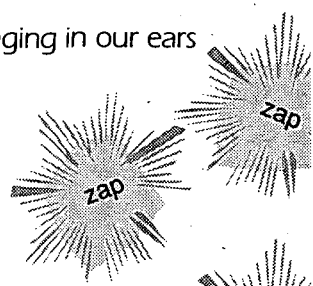


Christmas gypsies
/zap/ themselves
to Christmas season, when there's always work in retail.
Christmas over, Christmas layoffs,
/zap/
and they're gone

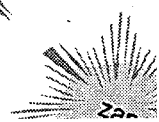
And Christmas is nothing without the family
Grandma and Grampa, getting along in years,
won't be here too many more Christmases
but
/zap/
Besides, once a year
it's sure cheaper than a home.

And some of us,
weary of cheerless cheer
tired of malls
sick of Christmas lyrics ringing in our ears
will,
at last,
escape.

/zap/



—Geoffrey A. Landis



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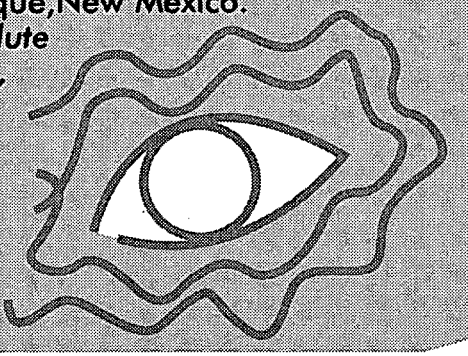
Daniel Abraham

JAYCEE

Daniel Abraham is a graduate of Clarion West '98, and a native of Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has sold work to *Absolute Magnitude*, *The Silver Web*, and *Vanishing Acts*. "Jaycee" is his first story for *Asimov's*.



The weight of the gun in his pocket pulled down the right side of his windbreaker. No matter how often Jack shrugged, he still felt uncomfortable. It was as if someone behind him was resting a hand on his shoulder.

The walk down to the river would have been pleasant on another day. The sun had just set, and the summer heat was already slipping out of the air. The trees that lined the river were still green, but less brilliant than they had been just a couple weeks before. Autumn coming in stealthily. The smell of Jaycee's father had seeped into his clothes like cigarette smoke at a bar, and it mixed with the scent of the river—familiar and alien at the same time.

The clearing was too small to deserve the name. It was nothing more than a thin spot in the trees. He'd brought Maggie here when they were still young and the idea of going to a little place down by the river had brought a certain erotic frisson with it. And then he and Kevin had gone fishing here, casting lines out into the lazy water.

Jack stood on the bank, looking out toward the far side as the light began to fade. Venus and the xeno's home ship fought through the still-blue sky, the two first stars of the evening, and neither one of them real stars at all. Jack remembered pointing them out to Kevin, teaching his boy to know one from the other, natural from foreign. He knew that the memory would sting, once the false peace of the numbed faded.

He waited, listening. When he spoke, he didn't turn. Just raised his voice enough that it could hear him.

"I know you're here," he said. "You might as well come on out."

For a long moment—almost long enough that he thought he might have been wrong after all—it was silent. Then a sudden rustle came from back and to his left. It was coming down out of a tree. Slow and calm, he turned to look.

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It was third generation. He would have known from the way it held itself even if he hadn't seen its family. Second generation still had the decency to look uncomfortable in clothes. Its face was disturbingly feminine. The thin rice-paper skin had an unnerving rainbow sheen, like oil on water. Three sets of eyes fastened on him. Denim jeans tailored for the thin legs ended in something almost like sneakers. Jack stood up and walked slowly over to it. It was small for its age, just over four feet, and awkward as a girl in her first growth. The air reeked with the burnt cinnamon smell they had when they were upset.

"You must be Jaycee," Jack said.

It nodded, an almost human gesture. When it spoke, it had the hint of a southern accent.

"Mr. Mason," it said.

They stood for a moment. Jack's palm brushed against the gun.

"You heard, then," Jack said. The cinnamon smell came with fresh power.

"Kevin . . ." it said. "I went as soon as I heard he was in the hospital."

It met his gaze. Jack didn't know which set of eyes to look at.

"It was me," Jaycee said. "Wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Jack said, unable to bite back the words. "It was you."

Jack was halfway through a cup of coffee that had gone tepid when the doctor met him in the waiting room. Jack could see from the young man's face that the news was bad.

Please God, he thought, *just let him be real sick. Don't take him away from me too.*

But he only frowned seriously, like he wasn't going to be cowed by some pencil-necked little shit who'd somehow gotten himself through med school. The doctor looked at him, but his gaze skittered away. He wouldn't meet Jack's eyes straight on.

"Jack Mason?" the doctor asked.

"Yeah, that's me."

"Come with me, please."

The doctor led him to a small room, a miniature of the waiting room he'd been pacing for the last three hours. The doctor moved to sit, but Jack stood, his arms crossed, and so the doctor stood too.

"Mr. Mason, I'm very sorry. If we'd even seen him two days ago, we could have done something. Xenocontact reaction is easily treatable in the early stages, but . . ."

"It isn't contact reaction," Jack said.

"Mr. Mason . . ."

"How the hell can you get contact reaction when there's no *contact?*" Jack demanded. An orderly walking past the door turned its head toward them, three sets of eyes flitting over them, and then looked away. Jack turned his back toward the door.

"Please don't shout, Mr. Mason," the doctor said, and there was a surprising firmness in his voice. He was looking at Jack now.

"I'm not shouting," Jack said, lowering his voice. "I just want to know how the hell you can stand there with your bare face hanging out and tell me that my boy's got contact reaction without any contact. That's all."

Jack wanted to keep going, wanted to fight, to argue. Anything to keep the doctor from saying what was in his face. But the young man steeled himself; his face grew colder. Jack's heart already ached.

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"Kevin has had protracted physical contact with an alien. We've seen this before, in wrestling teams with mixed species. . . ."

"He wasn't on a wrestling team," Jack snapped.

"Or if he was seeing a xeno for physical therapy that involved massage or direct manipulation of limbs. Or . . . if he had a girlfriend. Anything that would involve direct contact over a fairly long period of time."

"There was no contact," Jack insisted, but he could hear his voice losing power. A twinge of discomfort crossed the doctor's face—embarrassment on Jack's behalf.

"His immune system reacted to it in a way that's fairly rare, but not unheard of. Xenocontact reaction is easily treated in its early stages. If we'd seen him a few days ago . . . by the time he came in, it had progressed beyond our ability to treat. I'm very sorry, Mr. Mason."

"Oh Jesus," Jack breathed. "How long has he got?"

"We lost him ten minutes ago," the doctor said. "It wasn't as painful as it looked."

The air was suddenly very thin, and Jack had to sit down on the hard plastic chair. The doctor sat beside him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mason," he said again.

It lowered its head. Another gesture so close to human that it was eerie. All the xenos that Jack had known when he was growing up were first and second generation. They'd spoken the language well enough, but their bodies had never learned human movements. Jack had always thought it was just the way they were, that the difference was basic to the way their strange genetics constructed them. This one moved like a human, though. Maybe all the third-generation ones did.

"I'm sorry," it said. The smell of burnt cinnamon was laced with something else—something acrid. Like corn oil gone rotten. Despair, Jack thought.

"I found your notes," Jack said. "I guess he kept pretty much all of them."

It didn't speak.

"How long has this been going on?" Jack asked.

"Since April," it said. "There was a party toward the end of school."

"I *told* him," Jack muttered. "I told him I didn't want him going to any mixed-breed parties, and he had to go . . ."

"He didn't know," Jaycee interrupted. "He just knew it was a party. He walked through the door, and he saw me. It was like someone had kicked him. He tried to leave right then, but the guys who drove him there didn't want to.

"All night I kept peeking at him from around corners. He looked angry, but he smelled . . . he smelled like he liked me. I didn't know if he'd hit me or ask me out if I tried to talk to him."

It stopped, and Jack let the silence push for him. It turned away, shifting uncomfortably, then looked back at him. For an instant, Jack saw pain in its expression.

"He left a note in my locker. He wanted me to meet him. Here. I wasn't going to," Jaycee said. "There are stories about people being lured out by natives . . . humans, I mean. Lured out and beaten up. Or killed."

"It's been known to happen," Jack said coolly.

"There are stories that *you* do it, Mr. Mason," it said, and Jack thought he could hear fear in its voice, but he might have been imagining it.

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"I know there are," he said. "But you came out anyway. You and my boy."

"I'd never had a native boyfriend before," it said. "And he'd never been with a xeno. It happens a lot, though. We all grew up together. And we got picked as your first contact species because we're almost alike. I've never even been off-planet. I'm as native as a human."

"Like hell you are!" Jack snapped, and it shrank back a little. "When did the symptoms start?"

There was a breeze rustling the leaves and the river with its constant low murmur. When Jaycee spoke, its voice was so quiet that Jack almost couldn't make out the words.

"It looked like heat rash. Just a little heat rash. It wasn't bigger than a kiss mark." Its voice was amazed. "It was so *small*."

"How long ago?"

It went on, rubbing its hands together like it was washing them. His words hadn't penetrated the dream it was in.

"He said he just got a rash sometimes, and not to think anything about it. Then it got worse. It was all over his back and belly. I told him it was bad."

"How long!" Jack shouted.

It shied away from the sound like he'd hit it.

"Two weeks," it whispered. "I told him. I told him to go to the doctor."

"So why *didn't* he?" Jack demanded. "It was treatable, then! He would have been all right!"

It shook its head.

"He said he'd be okay. He said that he had some antibiotics from when he had an ear infection last Christmas, and that he'd just take those. He'd be fine."

Jack turned away from it, looking back to the river. More stars were poking through the twilight. The Big Dipper. The western sky was cobalt, just a few shades lighter than black. Dark had already taken the east.

"He said if you found out, you'd kill me," it said.

Jack thought about that for a long breath.

"Yeah, I guess that's right," he said, not sure as he said it which part he was agreeing to: that Kevin had kept quiet to protect the thing standing behind him now, or that he would have killed it if he'd known.

Both, maybe.

It backed up a couple of steps and sat on an old log. He could see the light shining off its eyes and the reflective white strips on its nearly sneakers—the kind of strips they put on for headlights to catch, and keep drivers from running a kid down by mistake.

"Did you come out here to kill me?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "That was the plan."

It sighed now. He'd never heard one of them do that. It didn't move, or try to run.

"You know," he said, "I've smelled your kind when you're scared. It's like lemon and acid. You don't smell like that at all."

"I'm not scared," it said.

"Why not?" he asked.

It didn't answer, and that was answer enough. He knew. It had come out here to die.

When he got back from the hospital, Jack parked across the street from

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his house and sat in the truck for ten full minutes, staring. It was a good house, a two-story bungalow with glass in the windows so old it was warped. The lawn hadn't been cut last weekend. Kevin was supposed to cut it once a week, but he'd slacked off.

Jack had borrowed the down payment from his old man. That had been right after the wedding, before Maggie got pregnant. Before she got sick. It had just been him and Kevin for four years. Now it was just him.

It didn't make sense. It just hadn't sunk in.

He walked into the silent house and dropped his keys on the front table, the way he always did. He went to the fridge, got a beer, sat down and thumbed on an all-news channel. He sat quietly for a while, the petty news of the world washing over him. Then, very deliberately, he stood up and threw his beer bottle at the glowing screen.

He considered the result of his violence—shattered glass, ruined circuitry. Still feeling an almost supernatural calm, he went to the kitchen and took down the dishes—brown and beige plates, cream-colored coffee cups with matching saucers, and tall peasant glasses that had always looked like jelly jars to him. Slowly, piece by piece, he threw them all against the wall. He noticed that he was crying, but couldn't recall when the tears had started.

He went upstairs. Kevin's room was immaculate, except for the unmade bed. A handful of red blemishes on the pale sheet marked where the boy's skin had split. Jack sat on the bed and brushed his fingertips across the indentation his son had left in the pillow.

The letters weren't hard to find. They were between the mattress and the box springs, the same place where generations of boys had hidden pornography and other secrets. There must have been a hundred of them, all on yellow legal-pad paper. The handwriting was crisp and legible, and they smelled odd.

K. I know you're out with your dad, but I'm just sitting here, at our place, listening to the river and thinking of you. And since you won't let me send you email, this is the closest I can be to you right now. You are the most beautiful boy in the whole world. . . .

It went on. It was signed with a cartoonish picture of a xeno eye surrounded by waves. Other notes were signed Isle of View—even then he had to say it out loud a couple of times before he understood. A few were just signed Jaycee.

Jack took Kevin's old yearbook down from the shelf and paged through it. In the whole school, there was only one Jaycee. He found its address in the school directory.

He stopped in his own room long enough to load his pistol and shove it in the pocket of his windbreaker.

"You know why he brought you here?" he asked.

It didn't speak for a second, just like a car skipping a stroke. It hadn't expected the question. It had been ready for violence, ready for him to kick its ribs in, put a hole in its head.

"No," it said.

"This is where I took his mother, when I was in college. You see that tree over there? The third one by the water?"

It turned to look. The trees were just silhouettes now, black shapes against the charcoal-gray river.

"If you look at it from the river side, you can see where I carved our ini-

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tials in it, mine and hers. The first place I ever kissed her was right here."

"Right here?" it asked.

"Well, somewhere around here," Jack said. "It was a long time ago."

There was a new smell coming off it. Something like overheated stone. Confusion, Jack thought. On the far western horizon, the contrail of a upper-altitude shuttle still caught the last of the daylight, shining for the moment, but fading fast.

"I met her just out of high school. I was at the community college the same time she was. Anyway, it wasn't like we were just kids. Not like you and Kevin. But we weren't really adults either. We just thought we were."

"You don't understand. . . ." it began, but Jack raised his hand, and Jaycee went quiet.

"When she was here, the whole world was different," he said slowly, hoping that if he didn't hurry, maybe it would understand. "I gave up studying history to do circuit design, because I knew I'd need better money. I got the house she wanted. And when she said she wanted kids . . . well, I wasn't sure back then. Having a kid seemed like a big thing. Like the kind of thing . . . that if you screwed it up . . ."

The numbness abandoned Jack for a moment, and the pain rolled over him. His Kevin was dead.

Not yet, he thought, and pushed the feelings away. *Soon, just not yet.*

"We were good," he said through clenched teeth. "You understand? We were happy."

"When did she get the cancer?" it asked

"Kev was eight years old. She hung on for two years, but . . ."

He shook his head.

"I'm sorry," it said.

"I went on, though," Jack said, ignoring the sympathy. "After she left, and it was just me and Kevin, I *had* to keep going, or we would both have gone down. I kept going, because Kevin, he needs me. And he needs that kind of strength. He needs to see that kind of strength in his daddy. It's how he'll learn. Aw, shit. . . ."

Jaycee was so quiet, he turned to look at it. The alien eyes glittered in the starlight. They were silent, and this time Jack felt that the silence was pushing on him, demanding that he go on. He'd run out of things to say, though, and it was the one to speak.

"So . . . what? Everything's gonna be all right?" it asked, and its voice was a blend of sympathy and anger that was almost human.

"He's gone." Jack said. "You can't bring him back, but you can learn to love him anyway. Love him from a ways off. Like I did for Maggie. You can keep going."

"I don't want to, Mr. Mason," it said. "I don't want to love him from a distance. I know I killed him. I don't *want* to live."

Jack didn't know he was going to stand up until he already had. He didn't intend to pull the alien up by its shoulders or pin it against a tree, but he did, in less time than taking a breath. It wriggled under his hands, squirting out lemon-and-acid fear scents.

"You know, Jaycee," Jack said. "I don't give a good God damn what you want."

The rage was cold now, but bright. He felt his own breath. He imagined his teeth growing sharper, longer. He was going to be caught this time. The

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knowledge was distant, though, too far in the future to care about. He pulled up to the curb and killed the engine.

The house was cheaply made, one of thousands of nearly identical ones that had gone up in the construction boom following first contact. Two stories high, with pressed plastic slats that looked just enough like wood for people to recognize the reference. The paint was peeling, but the yard was immaculate.

The truck door opened with a solid click and slammed closed behind him. He strode up the walk, light on the balls of his feet. He was ready to kick the front door in, but it was already standing ajar, and the reek from inside was overpowering.

Jack slid his hand around the gun, his finger light but firm on the trigger. He pushed the door with his shoulder, and it creaked a little as it opened. The interior was dim, the light filtering in through thick curtains. The lemon-and-acid scent of fear was thick, and something else laced under it. The low, surging babble of panicked alien voices came from a back room.

"Hello?" he said quietly and took two steps in. A flight of stairs led up to a hallway, bright with the reddish light of evening. "Anyone here?"

The scent was so thick, he could taste it like a penny on his tongue. He took another careful step.

"Jaycee?" he called softly.

The voices, he could tell now, were coming from the first floor, off to his left. One high-pitched and strident, talking too fast for him to follow, and another, lower, soothing, but ineffectual. He caught the word "hospital" and then, a moment later, "police."

Above this conversation, though, there was a keening, a wail pitched almost too high to register. It came from upstairs, and walking on the edge of the stair closest to the wall so it wouldn't creak, Jack made his way silently up.

The stench of alien grew thicker, and the underlying scent—unrecognizable, but disturbingly intimate—came on stronger. The hallway was short—three doors on one side, only one on the other—and painted an optimistic yellow. Only one door stood open, and the keening came through it. Jack drew the gun from his pocket and walked to the door.

The room was decorated in pastels. The furnishings were few and cheap. A small, unmade bed, a matching dresser. There were clothes on the floor—jeans with legs cut thin for alien legs, a crumpled T-shirt, a Sunday dress. An adult sat on the foot of the bed, its head cradled in long-fingered hands. The keening and the scent came from it.

Jack stepped in, holding the gun at his side. The xeno didn't look up, rocked gently back and forth. It was older, but not wrinkled. Second generation, Jack guessed. The suit it wore fit poorly, like a costume on a dog. The tie hung between its knees, almost touching the floor.

"Where's Jaycee?" Jack asked. It looked up, six eyes glittering wild and hopeless. It didn't seem surprised to see a human with a gun appear out of nowhere. It gestured at the window, hands flapping like frightened sparrows.

"Gone," it said, still keening. "My baby's gone."

"Gone where?"

The alien didn't answer, only put its head in its hands, looking down. Jack squatted and pressed the gun to its skull just where it began to slope back to its neck.

"Gone where?" he asked again.

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"Gone," it said, waving toward the dresser. "Just gone. My baby's dead."

Jack looked over. Along with the costume jewelry and alien perfume bottles, a piece of yellow paper was folded in sloppy thirds. Jack walked over, his gun still trained on the alien. He picked the note up with his left hand.

I killed him. It's my fault. I killed him. I can't breathe. I can't breathe without him. And I killed him. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. Please.

It went on, but Jack didn't bother. He put it back in its place and lowered the gun. The xeno didn't look at him. Jack understood the scent now. He couldn't place it, but it was exactly right, and he knew the emotion it signified. Tears for Kevin welled up in Jack's eyes—for *Kevin,* not for Jaycee, not for this keening thing on its child's empty bed!

"I'm . . ." Jack said, then stopped. "How did. . . ?"

"She went to the hospital after day camp," it said, its voice distant. "We found the note two hours ago."

Jack blinked.

"How do you *know,* then? Did you find the body?" Jack asked, but the question only brought the keening louder, the intimate scent more powerful.

"You're not sure?" Jack incredulous, then again, demanding. "You don't know, do you? You don't know if it's happened yet!"

The keening faltered and the eyes looked up into his face.

"She's gone," it murmured, like a child exhausted from weeping. "She's gone. My only baby."

"You don't *know* that," Jack shouted. "Your kid's in trouble, you piece of shit! Don't just *sit* there. Move!"

It didn't answer. Jack felt his lip curl, and he brought the gun back to bear on the alien's head, but he didn't pull the trigger. It never even moved.

The two others had gathered at the foot of the stairs. They started, confused, as he stalked past them, but they didn't stop him. Jack spat on the sidewalk and pushed the gun back into his pocket.

He started the truck and popped the clutch, tires squealing as he pulled out. Disgust and anger wrestled in his mind. The image of the alien sitting, head buried, waiting for the bad news to come. It didn't care. It didn't care about its own kid. What kind of father was that? What kind of father just sat there while his kid died?

What kind of father did that?

He had to pull over. He couldn't see the road to drive.

"God damn it, Kevin," he said, not sure what he meant by the words, except that they had to come out. "God damn it. God damn!"

He pressed his lips together hard, willing the tears to stop. Eventually, they did. The sun was on its way down. He started the truck again and headed back toward home. By the time he got there, he was pretty sure he knew where Jaycee was.

He turned and pushed it to the ground. The lemon-and-acid smell made him feel calmer, somehow. In control. Jaycee lay on the black soil, curled into a ball and weeping.

"I killed him," it wailed. "I killed him. I don't want to live! I can't *breathe.*"

Jack squatted beside it, smelling its fear and pain. He put his hand on its shoulder. The warmth of its flesh surprised him a little.

"I saw your father tonight," he said. "He was in your room. He couldn't move. He hurt too much. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

No reply more than its head shaking back and forth.

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"You listen to me," he said, holding his voice low. "You listen to *me,* you little piece of shit! You want to die? You have *no* right to do that to him. Your dad didn't do *shit* wrong. You have no right to punish him."

"I *killed* him. I loved him, and I killed him!"

"He died to save you. He died for *you.* And I'm not about to let you throw that away. He died for a *reason.*"

It laughed, a pained coughing sound, and turned to look up at him. Its mouth was open in a snarl, and the long fingers were clenched in strange, awkward fists.

"Fuck you!" Jaycee hissed. "Fuck you for even thinking that! He died because he *touched* me. *You* try living with that! Your wife? *You* didn't kill her. It wasn't *your* fault."

"It wasn't anyone's fault," Jack said. "It just . . ."

"You can make me go home tonight. Maybe. But you can't be there tomorrow. You can't be there forever. You can kill me, you native shitheap! But you can't keep me *alive.* I killed him. *Me.* And I don't want to live."

It spat at him. It wasn't the first time an alien had, but the wet spot on his cheek, cold in the night air, was a shock this time. As he wiped it off, his belly went hard with dread. Jaycee was still weeping, but its eyes were on him, fierce and wild.

Don't make me do this, he thought, *Jesus God, I don't want to do this.* But he knew what had to happen.

He took the alien child, pulled it up to sitting, and squatted, his face close to its. It was so dark he couldn't see much more than its silhouette.

"One of us killed him," Jack said, and saying the words felt worse than puking. "One of us did. But it wasn't you. He died to save *you.* From *me.*"

It caught its breath.

"It wasn't you," he repeated before his throat closed and no more words would come out. Jaycee stood up slowly. He knew it was looking at him, could imagine the expression on its face. For long seconds, they were silent.

In the darkness, a new scent came off it, like burning flesh. Anger, he thought. She was angry, and he knew as he sank back on his haunches trying hard not to weep, that he'd done it. Jaycee knew who was to blame now, who *really* was. There'd still be pain—maybe even some guilt—but it . . . *she* . . . wasn't going to hurt herself.

"Go home," he managed to croak. "Your daddy . . . your daddy's looking for you."

Something softer, like damp wool, cut through the hot, smoky air for a moment.

"I said *go home,* you little whore!" Jack shouted. "Before I change my God damn mind!"

Still, she hesitated for half a beat before she turned and ran. He could hear her for a long time, alien feet breaking twigs and stumbling in the gloom. Jack waited until the sound of her retreat faded down to nothing and then still counted to a thousand before he moved. The gun in his windbreaker pocket pulled down uncomfortably, but the invisible hand vanished as soon as Jack took the gun out.

It was a warm night. And the sound of the river was very peaceful. He went to sit on a slab of rock that poked out over the water where he'd taken his son fishing, once upon a time. O

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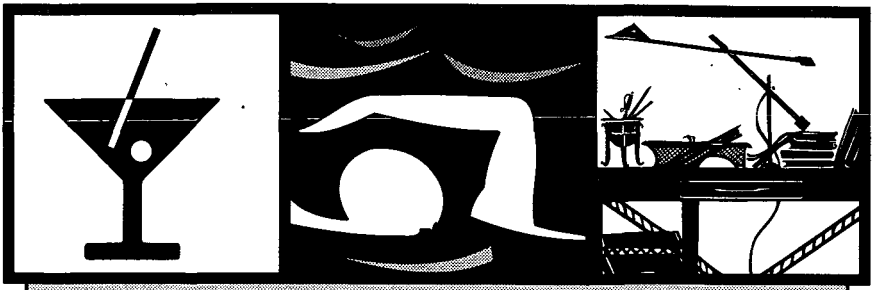

CURSE OF THE QUARK'S WIFE

He's not working late at the office.
He's not at the neighbor's pool.
He's not drinking at Barney's Tavern
and the bowling alley is closed.

She calls every number in the book
before her search is through.
She pulls her hair, wracks her brain,
still he's vanished without a clue.

And if she thinks she spots him
in some secret rendezvous,
beyond the death of midnight
and before the birth of day,

it only takes a nanosecond,
half a breath, the blink of a eye,
before his nature triumphs
and again he slips away.

Their marriage is a one-way street
she is forever racing down,
where neon lights dance like fools
yet no partner she has found.

—Bruce Boston

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Ian R. MacLeod

THE CHOP GIRL

Ian R. MacLeod teaches adult literary and creative writing classes, and he is currently at work on a fantasy novel set in a Victorian counter-world. His most recent story for us, the powerful "Summer Isles" (October/November 1998), is currently a Hugo finalist. Of his latest tale he says, "My parents both served in eastern England during the war, and were helpful to me with some of the details for this story. Chop girls really did exist, by the way, as do many, but not all, of the names of the air bases I've mentioned."

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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Me, I was the chop girl—not that I suppose that anyone knows what that means now. So much blood and water under the bridge, I heard the lassies in the post office debating how many world wars there had been last week when I climbed up the hill to collect my pension, and who exactly it was that had won them.

Volunteered for service, I did, because I thought it would get me away from the stink of the frying pans at home in our Manchester tea room's back kitchen. And then the Air Force of all things, and me thinking, lucky, lucky, lucky, because of the glamour and the lads, the lovely lads, the best lads of all, who spoke with BBC voices as I imagined them, and had played rugger and footie for their posh schools and for their posh southern counties. And a lot of it was true, even if I ended up typing in the annex to the cookhouse, ordering mustard and HP Sauce on account of my, quote, *considerable experience in the catering industry.*

So there I was—just eighteen and WAAF and lucky, lucky, lucky. And I still didn't know what a chop girl was, which had nothing to do with lamb or bacon or the huge blocks of lard I ordered for the chip pans. They were big and empty places, those bomber airfields, and they had the wild and open and windy names of the Fens that surrounded them. Wisbeach and Finneston and Witchford. And there were drinks and there were dances and the money was never short because there was never any point in not spending it. Because you never knew, did you? You never knew. One day your bunk's still warm and the next someone else is complaining about not changing the sheets and the smell of you on it. Those big machines like ugly insects lumbering out in the dying hour to face the salt wind off the marshes and the lights and blue smoke of the paraffin lanterns drifting across the runways. Struggling up into the deepening sky in a mighty roaring, and the rest of us standing earthbound and watching. Word slipping out that tonight it would be Hamburg or Dortmund or Essen—some half-remembered place from a faded schoolroom map glowing out under no moon and through heavy cloud, the heavier the better, as the bombers droned over, and death fell from them in those long steel canisters onto people who were much like us when you got down to it, but for the chances of history. Then back, back, a looser run in twos and threes and searching for the seaflash of the coast after so many miles of darkness. Black specks at dawn on the big horizon that could have been clouds or crows or just your eyes' plain weariness. Noise and smoke and flame. Engines misfiring. An unsettled quiet would be lying over everything by the time the sun was properly up and the skylarks were singing. The tinny taste of fatigue. Then word on the wires of MG 3138, which had limped in at Brightlingsea. And of CZ 709, which had ploughed up a field down at Theddlethorpe. Word, too, of LK 452, which was last seen as a flaming cross over Brussels, and of Flight Sergeant Shanklin, who, hoisted bloody from his gun turret by the medics, had faded on the way to hospital. Word of the dead. Word of the lost. Word of the living.

Death was hanging all around you, behind the beer and the laughs and the bowls and the endless games of cards and darts and cricket. Knowing as they set out on a big mission that some planes would probably never get back. Knowing for sure that half the crews wouldn't make it through their twenty-mission tour. So, of course, we were all madly superstitious. It just happened—you didn't need anyone to make it up for you. Who bought the first round. Who climbed into the plane last. Not shaving or shaving only

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half your face. Kissing the ground, kissing the air, singing, not singing, pissing against the undercarriage, spitting. I saw a Flight Officer have a blue fit because the girl in the canteen gave him only two sausages on his lunchtime plate. That night, on a big raid over Dortmund, his Lancaster vanished in heavy flak, and I remember the sleepless nights because it was me who'd forgotten to requisition from the wholesale butcher. But everything was sharp and bright then. The feel of your feet in your shoes and your tongue in your mouth and your eyes in their sockets. That, and the sick-and-petrol smell of the bombers. So everything mattered. Every incident was marked and solid in the only time that counted, which was the time that lay between now and the next mission. So it was odd socks and counting sausages, spitting and not spitting, old hats and new hats worn backward and forward. It was pissing on the undercarriage, and whistling. And it was the girls you'd kissed.

Me, I was the chop girl, and word of it tangled and whispered around me like the sour morning news of a botched raid. I don't know how it began, because I'd been with enough lads at dances, and then outside afterward fumbling and giggling in the darkness. And sometimes, and because you loved them all and felt sorry for them, you'd let them go nearly all the way before pulling back with the starlight shivering between us. Going nearly all the way was a skill you had to learn then, like who wore what kind of brass buttons and marching in line. And I was lucky. I sang lucky, lucky, lucky to myself in the morning as I brushed my teeth, and I laughingly told the lads so in the evening NAAFI when they always beat me at cards.

It could have started with Flight Sergeant Martin Beezly, who just came into our smoky kitchen annex one hot summer afternoon and sat down on the edge of my desk with his blond hair sticking up and told me he had a fancy to go picnicking and had got hold of two bikes. Me, I just unrollered my carbons and stood up and the other girls watched with the jaws of their typewriters dropped in astonishment as I walked out into the sunlight. Nothing much happened that afternoon, other than what Flight Sergeant Beezly said would happen. We cycled along the little dikes and bumped across the wooden bridges, and I sat on a rug eating custard creams as he told me about his home up in the northeast and the business he was planning to set up after the war delivering lunchtime sandwiches to the factories. But all of that seemed as distant as the open blue sky—as distant, given these clear and unsuitable weather conditions, as the possibility of a raid taking place that evening. We were just two young people enjoying the solid certainty of that moment—which the taste of custard creams still always brings back to me—and Flight Sergeant Beezly did no more than brush my cheek with his fingers before we climbed back onto the bikes, and then glance anxiously east toward the heavy clouds that were suddenly piling. It was fully overcast by the time we got back to the base, driven fast on our bikes by the cool and unsummery wind that was rustling the ditches. Already, orders had been posted and briefings were being staged and the groundcrews were working, their arclights flaring in the hangers. Another five minutes, a little less of that wind as we cycled, and there'd have been all hell to pay for me and for Flight Sergeant Beezly, who, as a navigator and vital to the task of getting one of those big machines across the dark sky, would have been shifted to standby and then probably court-martialled.

But as it was, he just made it into the briefing room as the map was being

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unfolded and sat down, as I imagine him, on the schoolroom desk nearest the door, still a little breathless, and with the same smears of bike oil on his fingers that I later found on my cheek. That night, it was Amsterdam—a quick raid to make the most of this quick and filthy cloud that the weather boffins said wouldn't last. Amsterdam. One of those raids that somehow never sounded right even though it was enemy-occupied territory. That night, GZ 3401, with Flight Sergeant Beezly navigating, was last seen laboring over the North Sea enemy coastal barrages with a full load of bombs, a slow and ugly butterfly pinioned on the needles of half a dozen searchlights.

So maybe that was the first whisper—me walking out of the annex before I should have done with Flight Sergeant Beezly, although God knows it had happened to enough of the other girls. That, and worse. Broken engagements. Cancelled marriages. Visits to the burns unit, and up the stick for going all the way instead of just most of it. Wrecked, unmendable lives that you can still see drifting at every branch Post Office if you know how and when to look.

But then, a week after, there was Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson, who had a reputation as one of the lads, one for the lassies. All we did was dance and kiss at the Friday hall down in the village, although I suppose that particular night was the first time I was really drawn to him because something had changed about his eyes. That, and the fact that he'd shaved off the Clark Gable moustache that I'd always thought made him look vain and ridiculous. So we ended up kissing as we danced, and then sharing beers and laughs with the rest of his crew in their special corner. And after the band had gone and the village outside the hall stood stony dark, I let him lean me against the old oak that slipped its roots into the river and let him nuzzle my throat and touch my breasts and mutter words against my skin that were lost in the hissing of the water. I put my hand down between us then, touched him in the place I thought he wanted. But Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson was soft as smoke down there, as cool and empty as the night. So I just held him and rocked him as he began to weep, feeling faintly relieved that there wouldn't be the usual pressures for me to go the whole way. Looking up through the oak leaves as the river whispered, I saw that the bright moon of the week before was thinning, and I knew from the chill air on my flesh that tomorrow the planes would be thundering out again. You didn't need to be a spy or a boffin. And not Amsterdam, but a long run. Hamburg. Dortmund. Essen. In fact, it turned out to be the longest of them all, Berlin. And somewhere on that journey Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson and his whole crew and his Lancaster simply fell out of the sky. Vanished into the darkness.

After that, the idea of my being bad luck seemed to settle around me, clinging like the smoke of the cookhouse. Although I was young, although I'd never really gone steady with anyone and had still never ventured every last inch of the way, and although no one dared to keep any proper score of these things, I was already well on my way to becoming the chop girl. I learned afterward that most bases had one; that—in the same way that Kitty from stores was like a mum to a lot of the crews, and Sally Morrison was the camp bicycle—it was a kind of necessity.

And I believed. With each day so blazingly bright and with the nights so dark and the crews wild-eyed and us few women grieving and sleepless, with good luck and bad luck teeming in the clouds and in the turning of the

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moon, we loved and lived in a world that had shifted beyond the realms of normality. So of course I believed.

I can't give you lists and statistics. I can't say when I first heard the word, or caught the first really odd look. But being the chop girl became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Empty wells of silence opened out when I entered the canteen. Chairs were weirdly re-arranged in the NAAFI. I was the chop, and the chop was Flight Sergeant Ronnie Fitfield and Flight Officer Jackie White and Pilot Officer Tim Reid, all of them in one bad late summer month, men I can barely remember now except for their names and ranks and the look of loss in their eyes and the warm bristle touch of their faces. Nights out at a pub; beating the locals at cribbage; a trip to the cinema at Lincoln, and the tight, cobbled streets afterward shining with rain. But I couldn't settle on these men because already I could feel the darkness edging in between us, and I knew even as I touched their shoulders and watched them turn away that they could feel it, too. At the dances and the endless booze-ups and the card schools, I became more than a wallflower: I was the petaled heart of death, its living embodiment. I was quivering with it like electricity. One touch, one kiss, one dance. Groundcrew messages were hard to deliver when they saw who it was coming across the tarmac. It got to the point when I stopped seeing out the planes, or watching them through the pane of my bunk window. And the other girls in the annex and the spinster WAAF officers and even the red-faced women from the village who came in to empty the bins—all of them knew I was the chop, all of them believed. The men who came up to me now were white-faced, already teetering. They barely needed my touch. Once you'd lost it, the luck, the edge, the nerve, it was gone anyway, and the black bomber's sky crunched you in its fists.

I can't tell you that it was terrible. I knew it wasn't *just*, but then, justice was something we'd long given up even missing. Put within that picture, and of the falling bombs and the falling bombers, I understood that the chop girl was a little thing, and I learned to step back into the cold and empty space that it provided. After all, I hadn't *loved* any of the men—or only in a sweet, generalized and heady way that faded on the walk from the fence against which we'd been leaning. And I reasoned—and this was probably the thing that kept me sane—that it wasn't *me* that was the chop. I reasoned that death lay somewhere else and was already waiting, that I was just a signpost that some crewmen had happened to pass on their way.

Me, I was the chop girl.

And I believed.

Such were the terrors and the pains of the life we were leading.

With the harvest came the thunderflies, evicted from the fields in sooty clouds that speckled the windows and came out like black dandruff when you combed your hair. And the moths and the craneflies were drawn for miles by the sparks and lights flaring from the hangers. Spiders prowled the communal baths, filled with their woodland reek of bleach and wet towels. The sun rippled small and gold like a dropped coin on the horizon, winking as if through fathoms of ocean.

With harvest came Walt Williams. Chuttering up to the Strictly Reserved parking space outside the Squadron Leader's office in a once-red MG and climbing out with a swing of his legs and a heave of his battered carpetbag. Smiling with cold blue eyes as he looked around him at the expanse of

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hangars, as if he would never be surprised again. Walt had done training. Walt had done Pathfinders. Walt had done three full tours, and most of another that had only ended when his plane had been shot from under him and he'd been hauled out of the Channel by a passing MTB. We'd all heard of Walt, or thought we had, or had certainly heard of people like him. Walt was one of the old-style pilots who'd been flying before the War for sheer pleasure. Walt was an old man of thirty, with age creases on his sun-browned face to go with those blue eyes. Walt had done it all and had finally exhausted every possibility of death that a bemused RAF could throw at him. Walt was the living embodiment of lucky.

We gathered around, we sought to touch and admire and gain advice about how one achieved this impossible feat—the *we* at the base that generally excluded me did, anyway. The other crew members who'd been selected to fly with him wandered about with the bemused air of pools winners. Walt Williams stories suddenly abounded. Stuff about taking a dead cow up in a Lancaster and dropping it bang into the middle of a particularly disliked Squadron Leader's prized garden. Stuff about half a dozen top brass wives. Stuff about crash landing upside down on lakes. Stuff about flying for hundreds of miles on two engines or just the one or no engines at all. Stuff about plucking women's washing on his undercarriage and picking apples from passing trees. Amid all this excitement that fizzed around the airfield like the rain on the concrete and the corrugated hangars as the autumn weather heaved in, we seemed to forget that we had told each other many of these stories before, and that they had only gained this new urgency because we could now settle them onto the gaunt face of a particular man who sat smiling and surrounded, yet often seeming alone, at the smoke-filled center of the NAAFI bar.

Being older, being who he was, Walt needed to do little to enhance his reputation other than to climb up into this Lancaster and fly it. That, and parking that rattling sports car the way he did that first day, his loose cuffs and his other minor disregards for all the stupidities of uniform, his chilly gaze, his longer-than-regulation hair, the fact that he was almost ten years older than most of the rest of us and had passed up the chance to be promoted to the positions of the men who were supposedly in charge of him, was more than enough. The fact that, in the flesh, he was surprisingly quiet, and that his long brown hands trembled as he chain-smoked his Dunhill cigarettes, the fact that his smile barely ever wavered yet never reached his eyes, and that it was said, whispered, that the Pilot Officer in the billet next to his had asked to be moved out on account of the sound of screaming, was as insignificant as Alan Ladd having to stand on a box before he kissed his leading ladies. We all had our own inner version of Walt Williams in those soaringly bright days.

For me, the shadow in bars and dancehall corners, potent in my own opposite way, yet now mostly pitied and ignored, Walt Williams had an especial fascination. With little proper company, immersed often enough between work shifts in doleful boredom, I had plenty of time to watch and brood. The base and surrounding countryside made a strange world that winter. I walked the dikes. I saw blood on the frost where the farmers set traps to catch the foxes, and felt my own blood turn and change with the ebb and flow of the bomber's moon. Ice on the runways, ice hanging like fairy socks on the radio spars as the messages came in each morning. The smell of the sea blown in over the land. In my dreams, I saw the figures of

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crewmen entering the NAAFI, charcoaled and blistered, riddled with bleeding wormholes or greyly bloated from the ocean and seeping brine. Only Walt Williams, laughing for once, his diamond eyes blazing, stood whole and immune.

Walt was already halfway through his tour by the time Christmas came, and the consensus amongst those who knew was that he was a unfussy pilot, unshowy. Rather like the best kind of footballer, he drifted in, found the right place, the right time, then drifted out again. I stood and watched him from my own quiet corners in the barroom, nursing my quiet drinks. I even got to feel that I knew Walt Williams better than any of the others, because I actually made it my business to study him, the man and not the legend. He always seemed to be ahead of everything that was happening, but I saw that there was a wariness in the way he watched people, and a mirrored grace in how he responded, as if he'd learned the delicate dance of being human, of making all the right moves, but, offstage and in the darkness of his hut where that pilot who was dead now had said he'd heard screaming, he was something else entirely. And there were things—apart from never having to buy drinks—that Walt Williams never did. Games, bets, cards. He always slipped back then, so smoothly and easily you'd have to be watching from as far away as I was to actually notice. It was as if he was frightened to use his luck up on anything so trivial, whereas most of the other crewmen, fired up and raw through these times of waiting, were always chasing a ball, a winning hand, thunking in the darts and throwing dice and making stupid bets on anything that moved, including us girls.

Watching Walt as I did, I suppose he must have noticed me. And he must have heard about me, too, just as everyone else here at the base had. Sometimes, on the second or third port and lemon, I'd just stare at him from my empty corner and will him, dare him, to stare back at me. But he never did. Those sapphire eyes, quick as they were, never quite touched on me. He *must*, I thought. He must look *now*. But never, never. Except when I stood up and left, and I felt his presence behind me like the touch of cool fingers on my neck. So strong and sharp was that feeling one night as I stepped down the wooden steps outside the NAAFI that I almost turned and went straight back in to confront him through those admiring crowds. But loneliness had become a habit by now, and I almost clung to my reputation. I wandered off, away from the billets and into the empty darkness of the airfield. There was no moon, but a seemingly endless field of stars. Not a bomber's night, but the kind of night you see on Christmas cards. After a week's rain, and then this sudden frost, I could feel the ground crackling and sliding beneath me. The NAAFI door swung open again, and bodies tumbled out. As they turned from the steps made to sway arm-in-arm off bed, I heard the crash of fresh ice and the slosh of water as they broke into a huge puddle. They squelched off, laughing and cursing. Standing there in the darkness, I watched the same scene play itself out over and over again. The splash of cold, filthy water. One man even fell into it. Freezing though I was, I took an odd satisfaction in watching this little scene repeat itself. Now, I thought, if they could see me as well as I can see them, standing in the darkness watching the starlight shining on that filthy puddle, they really would know I'm strange. Chop girl. Witch. Death incarnate. They'd burn me at the stake. . . .

I'd almost forgotten about Walt Williams when he finally came out, although I knew it was him. Instantly. He paused on the steps and looked up

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at the sky as I'd seen other aircrew do, judging what the next night would bring. As he did so, his shadow seemed to quiver. But he still walked like Walt Williams when he stepped down onto the frozen turf, and his breath plumed like anyone else's, and I knew somehow, knew in a way that I had never had before, that this time he really didn't know that I was there, and that he was off-guard in a way I'd never seen him. The next event was stupid, really. A non-event. Walt Williams just walked off with that loose walk of his, his hands stuffed into his pockets. He was nearly gone from sight into his Nissen hut when I realized the one thing that hadn't happened. Even though he'd taken the same route as everyone else, he hadn't splashed into that wide, deep puddle. I walked over to it, disbelieving, and tried to recall whether I'd even heard the crackle of his footsteps on the ice. And the puddle was even darker, wider, and filthier than I'd imagined. The kind of puddle you only get at places military. I was stooping at the edge of it, and my own ankles and boots were already filthy, when the NAAFI door swung open again, and a whole group of people suddenly came out. Somebody was holding the door, and the light flooded right toward me.

Even though I was sure they must all have seen me and knew who I was, I got up and scurried away.

All in all, it was a strange winter. We were getting used to Allied victories, and there'd even been talk of a summer invasion of France that had never happened. But we knew it would come next summer now that the Yanks had thrown their weight into it, and that the Russians wouldn't give up advancing, that it was really a matter of time until the War ended. But for us, that wasn't reassuring, because we knew that peace was still so far away, and we knew that the risks and the fatalities would grow even greater on the journey to it. Aircrew were scared in any case of thinking further than the next drink, the next girl, the next mission. Peace for them was a strange white god they could worship only at the risk of incurring the wrath of the darker deity who still reigned over them. So there was an extra wildness to the jollification when that year's end drew near, and a dawning realization that, whether we lived or died, whether we came out of it all maimed and ruined or whole and happy, no one else would ever understand.

There was a big pre-Christmas bash in a barn of the great house of the family that had once owned most of the land you could see from the top of our windsock tower. Of course, the house itself had been requisitioned, although the windows were boarded or shattered and the place was empty as we drove past it, and I heard later that it was never re-occupied after the War and ended up being slowly vandalized until it finally burnt down in the fifties. The barn was next to the stables and faced into a wide cobbled yard, and, for once, out here in the country darkness and a million miles from peace or war, no one gave a bugger about the blackout, and there were smoking lanterns hanging by the pens where fine white horses would once have nosed their heads. It was freezing, but you couldn't feel cold, not in that sweet orange light, not once the music had started, and the Squadron Leader himself, looking ridiculous in a pinny, began ladling out the steaming jamjars of mulled wine. And I was happy to be there, too, happy to be part of this scene with the band striking up on a stage made of bales. When Walt arrived, alone as usual in his rusty MG, he parked in the best spot between the trucks and climbed out with that fragile grace of his. Walt Williams standing there in the flamelight, a modern prince with the tum-

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bling chimneys of that empty old house looming behind him. A perfect, perfect scene.

I did dance, once or twice, with some of the other girls and a few of the older men who worked in the safety of accounts and stores and took pity on me. I even had a five-minute word—just like everyone else, kindly man that he was, and spectrally thin though the War had made him—with our Squadron Leader. As far away from everything as we were, people thought it was safe here to get in that bit closer to me. But it was hard for me to keep up my sense of jollity, mostly standing and sitting alone over such a long evening, and no chance of going back to base until far after midnight. So I did my usual trick of backing off, which was easier here than it was in the NAAFI. I could just drift out of the barn and across the cobbles, falling through layers of smoke and kicked-up dust until I became part of the night. I studied them all for a while, remembering a picture from *Peter Pan* that had showed the Indians and the Lost Boys dancing around a campfire.

Couples were drifting out now into the quiet behind the vans. I tried to remember what it was like, the way you could conjure up that urgency between flesh and flesh. But all I could think of was some man's male thing popping out like a dog's, and I walked further off into the dark, disgusted. I wandered around the walls of the big and empty house with its smell of damp and nettles, half-feeling my way down steps and along balustrades, moving at this late and early hour amid the pale shadows of huge statuary. It wasn't fully quiet here, this far away from the throb of the barn. Even in midwinter, there were things shuffling and creaking and breaking. Tiny sounds, and the bigger ones that came upon you just when you'd given up waiting. The hoot of an owl. The squeak of a mouse. The sound of a fox screaming. . . .

Perhaps I'd fallen asleep, for I didn't hear him coming, or at least didn't separate out the sound of his footsteps from my thoughts, which had grown as half-unreal as those dim statues, changing and drifting. So I simply waited in the darkness as one of the statues began to move, and knew without understanding that it was Walt Williams. He sat beside me on whatever kind of cold stone bench I was sitting, and he still had the smell of the barn on him, the heat and the drink and the smoke and the firelight. The only thing he didn't carry with him was the perfume of a woman. I honestly hadn't realized until that moment that this was another item I should have added to my long list of the things Walt Williams avoided. But somehow that fact had been so obvious that even I hadn't noticed it. It wouldn't have seemed right, anyway. Walt and just one woman. Not with the whole base depending on him.

I watched the flare of the match, and saw the peaked outline of his face as he stooped to catch it with two cigarettes. Then I felt his touch as he passed one to me. One of those long, posh fags of his, which tasted fine and sweet, although it was odd to hold compared with the stubby NAAFI ones because the glow of it came from so far away. No one else, I thought, would ever do this for me—sit and smoke a fag like this. Only Walt.

He finally ground his cigarette out in a little shower of sparks beneath his shoe. I did the same, more by touch than anything.

"So you're the girl we're all supposed to avoid?"

Pointless though it was in this darkness, I nodded.

It was the first time I'd heard him laugh. Like his voice, the sound was fine and light. "The things people believe!"

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"It's true, though, isn't it? It *is*, although I don't understand why. It may be that it's only because . . ." I trailed off. I'd never spoken about being the chop girl to anyone before. What I'd wanted to say was that it was our believing that had made it happen.

I heard the rustle of his packet as he took out another cigarette. "Another?"

I shook my head. "You of all people. You shouldn't be here with me."

The match flared. I felt smoke on my face, warm and invisible. "That's where you're wrong. You and me, we'd make the ideal couple. Don't bother to say otherwise. I've seen you night after night in the NAAFI. . . ."

"Not every night."

"But enough of them."

"And *I* saw you, that night. I saw you walk over that puddle."

"What night was that?"

So I explained—and in the process I gave up any pretense that I hadn't been watching him.

"I really don't remember," he said when I'd finished, although he didn't sound that surprised. This time, before he ground out his cigarette, he used it to light another. "But why should I? It was just a puddle. Lord knows, there are plenty around the base."

"But it was *there*. I was *watching*. You just walked over it."

He made a sound that wasn't quite a cough. "Hasn't everyone told you who I am? I'm Walt Williams. I'm lucky."

"But it's more than that, isn't it?"

Walt said nothing for a long while, and I watched the nervous arc of his cigarette rising and falling. And when he did begin to speak, it wasn't about the War, but about his childhood. Walt told me he'd come from a well-to-do family in the Home Counties, a place that always made me think of the BBC and pretty lanes with tall flowering hedges. He was the only child, but a big investment, as was always made clear to him, of his mother's time, his father's money. At first, to hear Walt talk, he really was the image of those lads I'd imagined I'd meet when I joined the RAF. He'd gone to the right schools. He really had played cricket—if only just the once when the usual wicket keeper was ill—for his county. His parents had him lined up to become an accountant. But Walt would have none of that, and my image of his kind of childhood, which was in all the variegated golds and greens of striped lawns and fine sunsets, changed as he talked, like a film fading. His mother, he said, had a routine that she stuck to rigidly. Every afternoon, when she'd come back from whatever it was that she was always did on that particular day, she'd sit in the drawing room with her glass and her sherry decanter beside her. She'd sit there, and she'd wait for the clock to chime five, and then she'd ring for the maid to come and pour her drink for her. Every afternoon, the same.

Walt Williams talked on in the darkness. And at some point, I began to hear the ticking rattle of something which I thought at first was his keys or his coins, the kind of nervous habit that most pilots end up getting. It didn't sound quite right, but by then I was too absorbed in what he was saying. Flying, once Walt had discovered it, had been his escape, although, because of the danger to their precious investment of time and good schools and money, his parents disapproved of it even as a hobby. They cut off his money, and what there was of their affection. Walt worked in garages and then on the airfields, and flew whenever he could. He even toured with a circus.

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The rattling sound continued as he spoke, and I sensed a repeated sweeping movement of his hand that he was making across the stone on which we were sitting, as if he was gently trying to scrub out some part of these memories.

Then the War came, and even though the RAF's discipline, and the regularity, were the same things that he detested in his parents, Walt was quick to volunteer. But he liked the people, or many of them, and he came to admire the big and often graceless military planes. The kind of flying he'd done, often tricks and aerobatics, Walt was used to risk; he opted for bombers rather than fighters because, like anyone who's in a fundamentally dangerous profession, he looked for ways in which he thought, wrongly as it turned out, the risk could be minimized. And up in the skies and down on the ground, he sailed through his War. He dropped his bombs, and he wasn't touched by the world below him. Part of him knew that he was being even more heartless than the machines he was flying, but the rest of him knew that if he was to survive it was necessary to fly through cold, clear and untroubled skies of his own making.

The faint sound of the band in the barn had long faded, and I could see the sweep and movement of Walt's hand more clearly now, and the clouds of our breath and his cigarette smoke hanging like the shapes of the statues around us. I had little difficulty in picturing Walt as he described the kind of pilot he'd once been; the kind who imagined, despite all the evidence, that nothing would ever happen to him. Not that Walt believed in luck back then—he said he only went along with the rituals so as not to unsettle his crew—but at a deeper and unadmitted level, and just like all the rest of us, luck had become fundamental to him.

In the big raids that were then starting, which were the revenge for the raids that the Germans had launched against us, so many bombers poured across their cities that they had to go over in layers. Some boffin must have worked out that the chance of a bomb landing on a plane flying beneath was small enough to be worth taking. But in a mass raid over Frankfurt, flying through dense darkness, there was a sudden jolt and a blaze of light, and Walt's top gunner reported that a falling incendiary had struck their starboard wing. Expecting a fuel line to catch at any moment, or for a night-fighter to home in on them now that they were shining like a beacon, they dropped their load and turned along the home flightpath. But the night-fighters didn't come, and the wind blasting across the airframe stopped the incendiary from fully igniting. Hours went by, and they crossed the coast of France into the Channel just as the night was paling. The whole crew were starting to believe that their luck would hold, and were silently wondering how to milk the most drama out of the incident in the bar that evening, when the whole plane was suddenly ripped apart as the wing, its spar damaged by the heat of that half-burning incendiary, tore off into the slipstream. In a fraction of a moment, the bomber became a lump of tumbling, flaming metal.

There was nothing then but the wild push of falling, and the sea, the sky, the sea flashing past them and the wind screaming as the bomber turned end over end and they tried to struggle from their harnesses and climb out through the doorways or the gaping hole that the lost wing had made. Walt said it was like being wedged in a nightmare fairground ride, and that all he could think of was having heard somewhere that the sea was hard as concrete when you hit it. That, and not wanting to die; that, and needing to

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be lucky. In a moment of weightlessness, globules of blood floated around him, and he saw his co-pilot with a spear of metal sticking right though him. There was no way Walt could help. He clambered up the huge height of the falling plane against a force that suddenly twisted and threw him down toward the opening. But he was wedged into it, stuck amid twisted piping and scarcely able to breathe as the tumbling forces gripped him. It was then that the thought came to him—the same thought that must have crossed the minds of thousands of airmen in moments such as these—that he would give anything, *anything* to get out. Anything to stay lucky. . . .

The darkness had grown thin and gauzy. Looking down now, I could see that Walt was throwing two white dice, scooping them up and throwing them again.

"So I was lucky," he said. "I got the parachute open before I hit the sea and my lifejacket went up and I wasn't killed by the flaming wreckage falling about me. But I still thought it was probably a cruel joke, to get this far and freeze to death in the filthy English Channel. Then I heard the sound of an engine over the waves, and I let off my flare. In twenty minutes, this MTB found me. One of ours, too. Of all the crew, I was the only one they found alive. The rest were just bodies. . . ."

I could see the outlines of the trees now through a dawn mist, and of the statues around us, which looked themselves like casualties wrapped in foggy strips of bandage. And I could see the numbers on the two dice that Walt was throwing.

A chill went through me, far deeper than this dawn cold. They went six, six, six . . .

Walt made that sound again. More of a cough than a chuckle. "So that's how it is. I walk over puddles. I fly though tour after tour. I'm the living embodiment of lucky."

"Can't you throw some other number?"

He shook his head and threw again. Six and six. "It's not a trick. Not the kind of trick you might think it is, anyway." Six and six, again. The sound of those rolling bones. The sound of my teeth chattering. "You can try if you like."

"You forget who I am, Walt. I don't need to try. I believe . . ."

Walt pocketed his dice and stood up and looked about him. With that gaze of his. Smiling but unsmiling. It was getting clearer now. The shoulders of my coat were clammy damp when I touched them. My hands were white and my fingertips were blue with the cold. And this place of statues, I finally realized, wasn't actually the garden of the house at all, but a churchyard. Our bench had been a tombstone. We were surrounded by angels.

"Come on . . ." Walt held out his hand to help me up. I took it.

I expected him to head back to his battered MG, but instead he wandered amid the tombstones, hands in his pockets and half-whistling, inspecting the dates and the names, most of which belonged to the family that had lived in that big house beyond the treetops. Close beside us, there was a stone chapel, and Walt pushed at the door until something crumbled and gave, and beckoned me in.

Everything about the graveyard and this chapel was quiet and empty. That's the way it is in a war. There are either places with no people at all, or other places with far too many. The chapel roof was holed and there were pigeon droppings and feathers over the pews, but it still clung to its dignity. And it didn't seem a sad place to me, even though it was decorated with oth-

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er memorials, because there's a sadness about war that extinguishes the everyday sadnesses of people living and dying. Even the poor brass woman surrounded by swaddled figures, whom Walt explained represented her lost babies, still had a sense of something strong and right about her face. At least she knew she'd given life a chance.

"What I don't understand," I said, crouching beside Walt as he fed odd bits of wood into an old iron stove in a corner, "is *why*. . . ."

Walt struck a match and tossed it into the cobwebbed grate. The flames started licking and cracking. "It's the same with cards. It's the same with everything."

"Can't you . . ."

"Can't I *what?*" He looked straight at me, and I felt again a deeper chill even as the stove's faint heat touched me. I've never seen irises so blue, or pupils so dark, as his. Like a bomber's night. Like the summer sky. I had to look away.

He stood up and fumbled in his pockets for another cigarette. As he lit it, I noticed that once again his hands were shaking.

"After the War, Walt, you could make a fortune. . . ."

He made that sound again, almost a cough; a sound that made me wish I could hear his proper laugh again. And he began to pace and to speak quickly, his footsteps snapping and echoing as the fire smoked and crackled and the pain of its warmth began to seep into me.

"What should I do? Go to a casino—me, the highest roller of them all? How long do you think *that* would last. . . ?"

Walt said then that you were never given anything for nothing. Not in life, not in war, not even in fairy tales. Before that night over Frankfurt, he'd sailed though everything. Up in those bomber's skies, you never heard the screams or the sound of falling masonry.

He slowed then, and crouched down again beside me, his whole body shivering as he gazed into the stove's tiny blaze.

"I see it *all* now," he said, and the smile that never met his eyes was gone even from his lips now. "Every bullet. Every bomb. Even in my dreams, it doesn't leave me. . . ."

"It won't last forever, Walt—"

His hand grabbed mine, hard and sharp, and the look in his eyes made me even more afraid. When he spoke, the words were barely a whisper, and his voice was like the voice of poor dead Pilot Officer Charlie Dyson as he pressed himself to me on that distant summer night under the oak tree.

When Walt said he saw it all, he truly meant he saw *everything*. It came to him in flashes and stabs—nightmare visions, I supposed, like those of the dead airmen that had sometimes troubled me. He saw the blood, heard the screams and felt the terrible chaos of falling masonry. He'd been tormented for weeks, he muttered, by the screams of a woman as she was slowly choked by a ruptured sewer pipe flooding her forgotten basement. And it wasn't just Walt's own bombs, his own deeds, but flashes, terrible flashes that he still scarcely dared believe, of the war as a whole, what was happening now, and what would happen in the future. He muttered names I'd never heard of. Belsen. Dachau. Hiro and Naga-something. And he told me that he'd tried walking into the sea to get rid of the terrors he was carrying, but that the tide wouldn't take him. He told me that he'd thought of driving his MG at a brick wall, only he didn't trust his luck—or trusted it too much—to be sure that any accident or deed would kill him. And yes,

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many of the stories of the things he'd done were true, but then the RAF would tolerate much from its best, its luckiest, pilots. For, at the end of the day, Walt still *was* a pilot—the sky still drew him, just as it always had. And he wanted the war to end like all the rest of us because he knew—far more than I could have then realized—about the evils we were fighting. So he still climbed into his bomber and ascended into those dark skies. . . .

Slowly, then, Walt let go of me. And he pushed back his hair, and ran his hand over his lined face, and then began stooping about collecting more bits of old wood and stick for the fire. After a long time staring into the stove and with some of the cold finally gone from me, I stood up and walked amid the pews, touching the splintery dust and studying the bits of brass and marble from times long ago when people hadn't thought it odd to put a winged skull beside a puffy-cheeked cherub. . . .

Walt was walking up the church now. As I turned to him, I saw him make that effort that he always made, the dance of being the famous Walt Williams, of being human. From a figure made out of winter light and the fire's dull woodsmoke, he gave a shiver and became a good-looking man again, still thinly graceful if no longer quite young, and with that smile and those eyes that were like ice and summer. He turned then, and put out his arms, and did a little Fred Astaire dance on the loose stones, his feet tap-tapping in echoes up to the angels and the cherubs and the skulls. I had to smile. And I went up to him and we met and hugged almost as couples do in films. But we were clumsy as kids as we kissed each other. It had been a long, long time for us both.

We went to the stove to stop ourselves shivering. Walt took off his jacket, and he spread it there before the glow, and there was never any doubt as we looked at each other. That we would go—stupid phrase—all the way.

So that was it. Me and Walt. And in a chapel—a *church*—of all places. And afterward, restless as he still was, still tormented, he pulled his things back on and smoked and wandered about. There was a kind of wooden balcony, a thing called a choir, at the back of the chapel. As I sat huddled by the stove, Walt climbed the steps that led up to it, and bits of dust and splinter fell as he looked down at me and gave a half-smiling wave. I could see that the whole structure was shot through with rot and woodworm, ridiculously unsafe. Then, of all things, he started to do that little Fred Astaire dance of his again, tip-tapping over the boards.

I was sure, as I stared up at Walt from the dying stove, that he danced over empty spaces where the floor had fallen though entirely.

Walt was due back at base that morning, and so was I: we all were. There had already been talk on the wire that tonight, hang-over or no hang-over, Christmas or no Christmas, there would be a big raid, one of the biggest. Leaving the chapel and walking back under the haggard trees toward the littered and empty barn, which stank of piss and butt ends, we kept mostly silent. And Walt had to lever open the bonnet of his MG and fiddle with the engine before he could persuade it to turn over. He drove slowly, carefully, back along the flat roads between the ditches to the airfield where the Lancasters sat like dragonflies on the horizon. No one saw us as we came in through the gates.

Walt touched my cheek and gave that smile of his and I watched him go until he turned from sight between the Nissen huts and annexes, and then hurried off to get dressed and changed for my work. But for the smudge of

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oil left by his fingers, I could tell myself that none of it had happened, and get on with banging my typewriter keys, ordering mustard by the tub and jam by the barrel and currants by the sackload as the ordnance trucks trundled their deadly trains of long steel canisters across the concrete and the groundcrew hauled fuel bousers and the aircrew watched the maps being unrolled and the pointers pointed at the name of a town in Europe that would mean death for some of them.

There was never long to wait for winter darkness, and the clouds were dense that day. The airfield seemed like the only place of brightness by the time the runway lanterns were lit and the aircrew, distant figures already, threw their last dart and played their last hand and put on their odd socks and whistled or didn't whistle and touched their charms and kissed their scented letters and pressed their fingers to the concrete and walked out to their-waiting Lancasters. Standing away from where everyone else had gathered, I watched the impenetrable rituals and tried without success to figure out which dim silhouette was Walt's as they clustered around their Lancasters. And I listened as the huge Merlin engines, one by one, then wave on wave, began to fire up. You felt sorry, then, for the Germans. Just as the sound became unbearable, a green flare flickered and sparkled over the base. At this signal, the pitch of the engines changed as bombers lumbered up to face the wind and slowly, agonizingly, pregnant with explosives and petrol, struggled up the runways to take flight.

That night, it was dark already. All we could do was listen—and wait—as the sound of the last Lancaster faded into that black bomber's sky without incident.

The way things turned out—thanks to a secret war of homing beams and radar—it was a good, successful raid. But Walt Williams didn't come back from it, even though his Lancaster did, and the story of what had happened was slow to emerge, opposed as it was by most people's disbelief that anything could possibly have happened to him.

I made the cold journey across the airfield late that next afternoon to look at his Lancaster. The wind had picked up by then, was tearing at the clouds, and there was a stand-down after all the day and the night before's activity. No one was about, and the machine had been drained of what remained of its ammunition, oil, and fuel, and parked in a distant corner with all the other scrap and wreckage.

It was always a surprise to be up close to one of these monsters, either whole or damaged; to feel just how big they were—and how fragile. I walked beneath the shadow of its wings as they sighed and creaked in the salt-tinged wind from across the Fens, and climbed as I had never climbed before up the crew's ladder, and squeezed through bulkheads and between wires and pipes toward the grey light of the main cabin amid the sickly oil-and-rubber reek.

The rest of the aircrew had reported a jolt and a huge inrush of air as they took the homeward flightpath, but what I saw up there, on that late and windy afternoon, told its own story. Most of the pilot's bubble and the side of the fuselage beside it had been ripped out—struck by a flying piece of debris from another plane, or a flak shell that refused to explode. Walt had been torn out, too, in the sudden blast, launched into the skies so instantly that no one else had really seen exactly what had happened. They'd all hoped, as the co-pilot had nursed the plane back home through the dark-

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ness, that Walt might still have survived, and, Walt being Walt, might even make it back through France instead of ending up as a German prisoner. But the morning had revealed that Walt, either intentionally or through some freak of the way the wind had hit him, had undone all the straps from his seat and had fallen without his parachute. Even now, it was still there, unclaimed, nestled in its well. I was able to bend down and touch it as the wind whistled through that ruined aircraft, and feel the hard inner burden of all those reams of silk that might have borne him.

Then, I believed.

I was transferred to another base in the spring after, when my section was re-organized in one of strange bureaucratic spasms that you get in the military. They'd had their own chop girl there who'd committed suicide by hanging herself a few months before, and they mostly ignored the rumors that came with me. It was as if that poor girl's sacrifice had removed the burden from me. Her sacrifice—and that of Walt Williams.

Still, I was changed by what happened. There were other men with whom I had dates and longer-term romances, and there were other occasions when I went all instead of just part of the way. But Walt's ghost was always with me. That look of his. Those eyes. That lined, handsome face. I always found it hard to settle on someone else, to really believe that they might truly want to love me. And by the time the War had finally ended, I was older, and, with my mother's arthritis and my father's stroke, I soon ended up having to cope with the demands of the tea-room almost single-handed. Time's a funny thing. One moment you're eighteen, lucky, lucky, lucky, and enlisting and leaving Manchester forever. The next you're back there, your bones ache every morning, your face is red and puffy from the smoke and the heat of cooking, and the people over the serving counter are calling you Mrs. instead of Miss, even though they probably know you aren't—and never will be—married. Still, I made a success of the business, even if it ruined my back, seared my hands, veined and purpled my face. Kept it going until ten years ago, I did, and the advent down the street of a McDonald's. Now, my life's my own, at least in the sense that it isn't anybody else's. And I keep active and make my way up the hill every week to collect my pension, although the climb seems to be getting steeper.

The dreams of the War still come, though, and thoughts about Walt Williams—in fact, they're brighter than this present dull and dusty day. I sometimes think, for instance, that if everyone *saw* what Walt saw, if everyone *knew* what was truly happening in wars and suffered something like these visions, the world would become more a peaceable place and people would start to behave decently toward each other. But we have the telly now, don't we? We can all see starving children and bits of bodies in the street. So perhaps you need to be someone special to begin with, to have special gifts for the tasks you're given, and be in a strange and special time when you're performing them. You have to be as lucky and unlucky as Walt Williams was.

And I can tell myself now, as I dared not quite tell myself then, that Walt's life had become unbearable to him. Even though I treasure him for being the Walt who loved me for those few short hours, I know that he sought me out *because* of what I was.

Chop girl.

Death flower.

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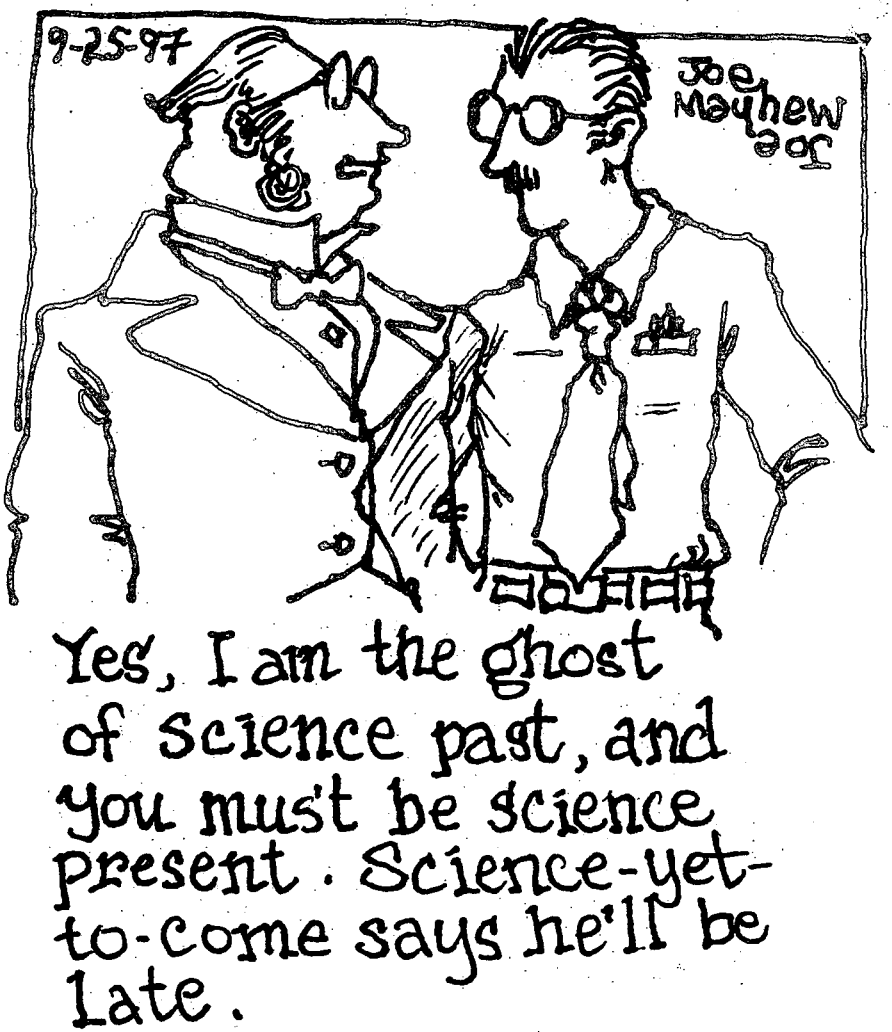
Witch.

And I sometimes wonder what it was that hit Walt's Lancaster. Whether it really was some skyborne scrap of metal, or whether luck itself hadn't finally become a cold wall, the iron hand of that dark bombers' deity? And, in my darkest and brightest moments, when I can no longer tell if I'm feeling sad or desperately happy, I think of him walking across that foul puddle in the starlight as he came out of the NAAFI, and as I watched him in an old chapel after we'd made love, dancing across the choir above me on nothing but dust and sunlight. And I wonder if someone as lucky as Walt Williams could ever touch the ground without a parachute to save him, and if he isn't still out there in the skies that he loved. Still falling. O



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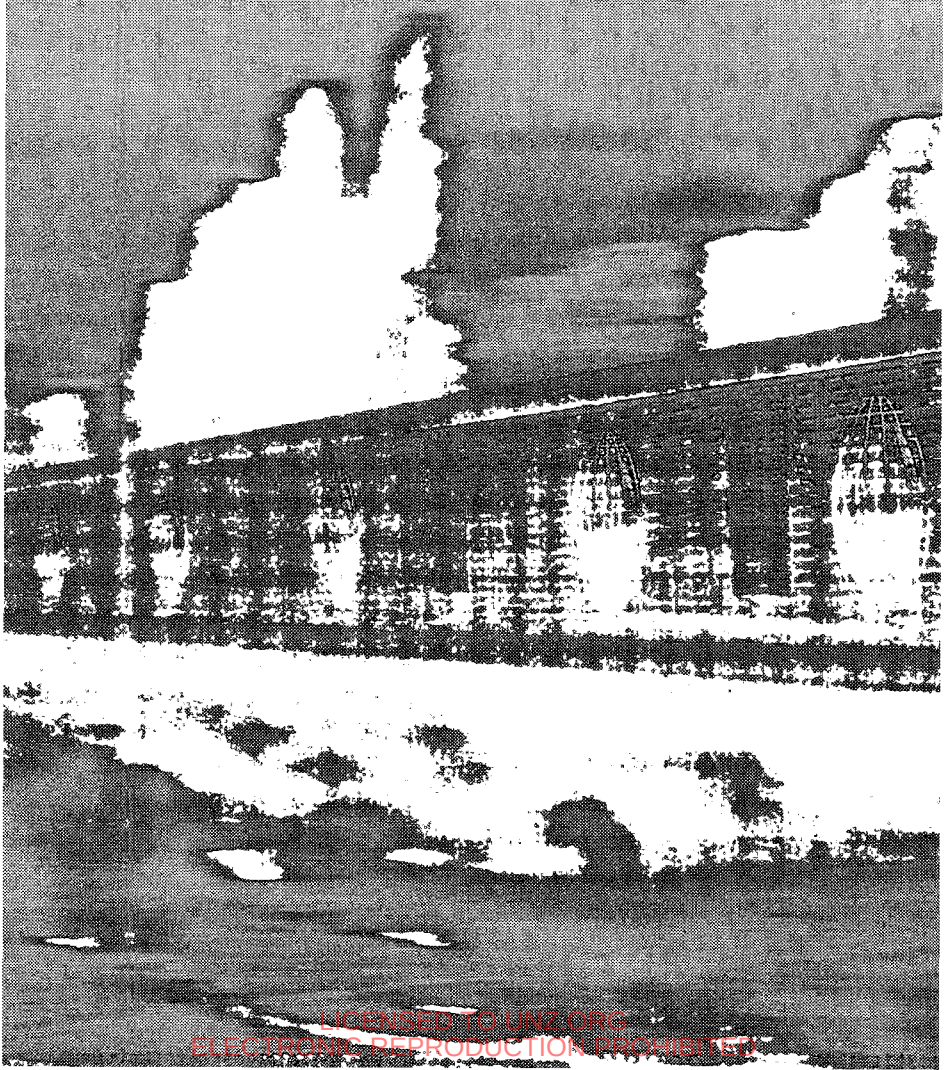
Alastair Reynolds

Even a murderer should beware the treacherous fangs of the . . .

VIPER

Illustration by Alan Giana



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December 1999

The man from the National Institute of Corrections reached the Bureau of Prisons checkpoint at sunset. His government-issue three-wheeler had been assembled from modular components that morning in Merced, for one journey only, plus the trip back to the disassembly center. Flashing his badge at the gate, Stockard mused that the car *still* smelled as if it had carried a thousand occupants—all with questionable hygiene.

Barrier up, he drove manually into the compound, parking next to a pair of railroad lines. Glancing into the mirror, he straightened his tie and tried to ignore the tide of perspiration licking around his collar.

He remembered the colonel.

He took the slip of paper from his pocket, glanced at the phone number one last time before chewing it to a pulp.

Then got out of the car.

"This way, sir," said a white-helmeted security guard, toting a machine-gun molded in lurid green polymer. "Prison's due in about five minutes, so we'd better hurry."

Near the horizon, a white line rippled in the haze.

"I knew I was late, but it looks miles away."

"Be here sooner than you think."

A single spotlessly white locomotive throbbed at a standstill, coupled to a passenger car. Both items of stock were armored and emblazoned with eagle-and-shield seals, their windows fenced by grills. Stockard was helped aboard, the armored door closing immediately. Through one of the grilled windows, he saw the landscape start moving.

"First time out here, Mr. Stockard?" Another correctional officer; buzz-cut hair the color of ash. "If so, there's a few things you need to know."

"A prison's a prison," Stockard said. The National Institute of Corrections was a smaller branch of government than the Bureau of Prisons, and Stockard was accustomed to condescension from the larger organization, to which the NIC provided advisory and technical support. "How different can it be?"

"One-hundred-and-thirty-miles-an-hour different." The guard frisked him while he talked. Another went through Stockard's suit jacket and briefcase, handling the viper equipment with due caution, aware of the value it represented, if not its function. "About twice as fast as we're moving now."

"I wasn't planning on jumping."

"Good thing, too. Wouldn't leave enough of you to top a pizza!"

Sparse prairie vegetation whisked past the tinted windows.

"Anyone try it?"

"Occasionally. If they can get to the outside of the train, which isn't easy. Then, of course, they're tempted—freedom's only a hop away."

"So's Pizza Hut."

"You got it!"

They handed him his briefcase, the viper equipment still inside.

"Move forward into the next compartment, please," said the guard. "The MIF'll be drawing alongside shortly, and we don't have much of a window to get you across."

He was led through into a white-walled room. A guard watched a screen, fingers poised above a set of controls, day-glo rifle slung across his back. The screen showed the train Stockard had seen in the distance, slowly pulling alongside. Three snorting locomotives hitched together at the front, armored like rhinocerous, hauling a string of wide, double-deck cars.

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The room slid to one side; a mild bump signaling the meeting of the two trains. The armored door opened to reveal white bars, two interior train guards standing behind them.

"Welcome to MIF-17, Mr. Stockard. I'm Warden Paula Wills." He was being addressed by a small, olive-skinned woman in a burgundy suit. "I don't often get to say this—at least not with any sincerity—but I hope your stay inside our facility is a pleasant one."

Stockard struggled for a riposte as he stepped aboard.

"Certainly impressed by what I've seen so far."

Warden Wills smiled. "Consider how it looks from an inmate's point of view."

"Pretty scary, I imagine. I'd still rather psychos like Culhane were kept behind a few meters of concrete."

"I don't much blame you, after what happened with Grodin." Wills indicated that they should move down a narrow windowless corridor. "If it's any consolation, I'd have made the same judgments had I sat on that board."

"It isn't, but thanks for the sentiment."

"Nonetheless, it doesn't alter the facts here. Avery Culhane's served his sentence. A dozen internal psychiatric evaluations say he poses no threat to society."

They paused to collect coffee.

"Pretty much what we thought about Grodin back in '27."

"The psychiatric models are better now. If Grodin underwent the same evaluation we've given Culhane, no way he'd get out."

"Too late for Grodin's victims, though."

There was a moment's hesitation before she answered, and Stockard knew why. What had happened to his wife was not a secret well-kept within the service.

"You know I can't keep Culhane incarcerated to atone for prior errors. Start doing that, we're as bad as the monsters we lock up."

"Can't you find some reason to hold him?"

"Sorry, but being a creepy sonofabitch isn't currently a federal offense."

"Shame."

Wills nodded wearily. "I agree, actually—but unless you can come up with something, Culhane walks." She glanced uneasily at the briefcase, as if it contained a literal viper. "When will it—um—begin?"

"As soon as he's asleep. We'll need a dedicated room, of course. The whole procedure could last several days."

"I thought it would take longer."

"Sometimes it does." Stockard thought about the sixty-seven previous inmates he'd put through the machine. "But three days should be plenty long enough for Culhane, trust me. It'll seem like a hell of a lot more to him."

"I don't understand."

Stockard lowered his voice. "Once he's in viper, the machine will intervene in the normal functioning of his internal clock, a neural structure called the frontal-striatal loop. They mapped it in rats, originally."

"That's legal?"

Stockard shrugged. "It's a pilot project. It can stand a few gray areas."

They walked deeper into the train.

When the correctional system finally choked, and when pressure groups decreed that every potential new prison was a blight in *someone's* backyard,

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the only logical option had been to build prisons that did not occupy fixed locations.

They called them Mobile Incarceration Facilities.

Each mile-long MIF consisted of one hundred cars; each double-deck vehicle housing twenty single-occupant cells in rows of ten each, facing gangways painted white and reeking of Clorox. Periodically, cars were opened out for canteens or recreation. There were workzones under the auspices of Federal Prison Industries, where inmates earned a small wage. There were infirmaries, six classrooms, plus a dozen cars set aside for prison administration and accommodation. Even a helipad on the roof. Glue-gun and taser turrets ran along ceiling rails. Stockard didn't see many guards, and most of the inmates looked subdued.

"What about the secrecy angle?" Wills said. "Why did I have to sign so much damned paperwork?"

"Viper only functions if people don't believe it exists."

"Like the Easter Bunny in reverse?"

"Except this bunny's matte-black and fits in a briefcase." Stockard smiled. "Leaks are unavoidable. But as long as they stay at the conspiracy-nut level, we're safe."

"What about the inmates who go through the system? Aren't they a risk afterward?"

"Not at all. Most of them can't integrate the experience afterward—they assume they dreamt it."

"Next of kin, then? If an inmate fails, doesn't the family want to know why?"

"And we tell them. Behavioral tests indicated lingering sociopathic tendencies. Nothing more needs to be said. Anyhow, if viper reveals pathology, chances are it'll have shown up elsewhere."

Wills halted, next to a guarded door.

"Culhane might be the exception that proves the rule."

The door admitted them to an interview room, spartanly furnished. Avery Culhane was the sole occupant.

"I told you," the inmate said. "You won't find anything in my cell—no matter what you're looking for."

"Shut up, shit-stripe," Wills said. "I don't recall giving you permission to express yourself."

"I need permission now?"

Culhane was sitting in a bolted-down seat with his arms above his lap, clothed in jailhouse denim. Stockard placed his briefcase between his knees as he lowered himself into one of the vacant chairs.

"I'm a criminal psychiatrist with the National Institute of Corrections. They've sent me to offer my expert opinion to the parole board."

Behind, the cell door closed, leaving them alone with Culhane. Scenery streaked past outside like a faded film.

"Been a good boy, haven't I?"

Apart from a fastidious mustache and beard, and oiled black hair raked from his forehead, Culhane didn't look old enough to have served a term of nearly ten years. But Culhane had been a precocious offender, and there were few landmarks of sociopathology that he had not visited, including the standard dysfunctional childhood and early experiments in the giving of hurt.

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"No, Avery," Stockard said quietly. "The one thing you most certainly haven't been is a good boy. That's why you're on the train to Fuck-Up Central."

Six separate families, butchered in their homes over a period of four years. The details were horrific; exercises in carnage which one journalist had described as the formalized sculpture of living meat.

"I did terrible things, I admit that."

"Question is, do I *believe* you when you say that?"

"You could ask that question of any inmate in any institution in the country, and the answer wouldn't mean shit."

Stockard nodded. To which, he thought, it was but a short jump to the ultimate solipsism: that the universe was populated by nothing except living meat, awaiting sculpture.

"Do you know what will happen to you if you're released?"

"Transfer to a half-way house; low-security institution with real cutlery and some scenery that doesn't move the fuck past the window."

"What if you feel like slicing someone?"

"I could ask *you* the same question," Culhane said. "You've seen the clinical tests. Start doubting those and you're on a very slippery slope. Some real snakes in that ethical grass."

Stockard leaned forward until he could smell Culhane.

"What did you say?"

"I said, some real snakes in that ethical grass." Culhane frowned. "Just a turn of phrase."

A beeper went off. Warden Wills unclipped it from her belt and read the message.

"Sorry," she said. "But this little chat will have to be curtailed."

"What is it?" Stockard asked, when they had left the room.

"Oh, the usual armed prisoner with a hostage deal; nothing we can't handle."

She sounded like she meant it.

They passed along more cell cars, then through one of the workzones, where Stockard saw prisoners englobed in white virtual-reality rigs. Most of the contracts FPI serviced would be in data-flow management; glorified plumbing where workers helped ease the fluid movement of information around the global networks.

The incident was near one of the FPI cars.

A cordon of guards blocked their way, but they pushed through to the front. At the far end of the aisle, an inmate was holding a pink gun against the neck of a young officer, pinned in an armlock by the muscular prisoner. One of Wills's adjutants was negotiating with the inmate. From what Stockard could gather, the man was being asked to put down the pink gun voluntarily, in preference to being forcibly disarmed.

Wills whispered: "Stupid damned fool. It must never have entered his mind that none of the other inmates made an attempt to grab the gun."

"What happened?"

"The guard was escorting three prisoners back from the workzone when he noticed an obstruction in the ceiling track. He was trying to free it—contra regs, of course—when he lost his footing and dropped the gun. He'll be on suspension, now—and serves him right."

"Aren't you more worried about him getting his head blown off?"

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"Not really. There's a safety chip in the gun, for a start. But the inmate doesn't know that, and I'd rather he surrendered the weapon thinking it was still useful."

"Aren't you going to intervene?"

"Not unless my team can't handle it." She sounded almost disengaged from what was transpiring. "Is something the matter, incidentally?"

"Maybe," Stockard said. "Anything strike you about the little conversation we had back there?"

"Not really—if Culhane threatened you, I missed it."

"It wasn't exactly a threat. More a hint that he knew about the program."

Now he had her interest.

"That isn't possible. Is it?"

"Maybe we should have chosen a different acronym. But if Culhane does know, it changes everything."

Suddenly, a voice was loud. It was less a shout than a heightened conversational voice.

"For the last time, surrender the weapon. You will not be warned again." There was a pause of five seconds before the man spoke again, now so quietly that Stockard barely caught it. "All right. Liquify the fucker."

Someone did something.

The gun lost its solidity, splashing to the floor in a torrent of lurid pink. Bullets rained down with it, chiming as they landed, rolling harmlessly away from the inmate. The man looked down in dumb incomprehension at his fist, still shaped around a grip that had just ceased to exist.

He was standing in a luminous pink puddle.

"Smart polymer," Wills said, sighing. "Gets 'em every time."

Stockard phoned his wife from the prison and told her about Culhane.

"When I looked into his eyes, it was like flashing back to Grodin. I'm scared, Catherine. Scared that it's happening again, only this time I know it, and there's still nothing we're going to be able to do."

He blew a kiss down the phone and hung up.

Two hours after lights out, Stockard and Warden Wills visited Culhane, along with a young intern and two orderlies, all of whom had signed the relevant paperwork. Culhane had been moved to a new cell in a different part of the train. The door was opened without disturbing him and the doctor, moving silently as a ghost, administered something that would keep Culhane sleeping. The orderlies took Culhane's body and carried him from the cell, passing along red-lit corridors until they reached the room that had been assigned for the viper procedure. The room housed an examination couch, surfaced with a sterile mattress.

"Put him on it," Stockard said, placing his briefcase down on a cabinet. "Face up will do."

After the orderlies had left, he flicked open the case and removed the components, arranging them methodically. Status LED's pulsed to signify the health of each part as Stockard reassembled the equipment.

"Quite something," Wills said.

"I was the kid who always wanted a Junior Spy kit," Stockard said.

The main part of the viper apparatus was a skeletal black helmet, formed from interlocking rings and arcs. The inner surface was nubbed with a matrix of delicate superconducting magnetic field generators. When the crown was fitted over Culhane's head, the field generators aligned themselves

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with areas of neural function and commenced generating test fields. Ghostlier fields generated by the electrical activity in Culhane's brain were already being measured by the device and compared against its vast neurological library.

"All right," the intern said, slipping an IV into Culhane's forearm. "Much as it pains me to admit it, I don't have the faintest idea what this is about, other than I'm supposed to keep this turkey sedated for as long as it takes. Would you care to explain?"

"Viper," Stockard said. "Virtual interactive parole evaluation resource. Imported Indian airforce VR technology."

"I'd heard the Indians were ahead of us in certain fields, but . . ."

"Not so much ahead of us, as pissing on us from a great height." Stockard tapped the ultraslim control console that rested on an adjacent table, connected to the helmet by a tangle of optical ganglia. The console had a small keypad and a slot holding a diskette. "Viper's adapted from training equipment. They wanted to use VR to assess the psychological fitness of their pilots. Trouble was, in order to get a realistic response, they had to make it seem so real it couldn't be distinguished from reality."

"You'd still know it's fake."

"Not if you're put into it while you're asleep. That was how they tested their pilots. One day they'd wake up in the middle of the next world war. They didn't have time to shit their pants, let alone ask themselves if they were inside a simulation."

"And if they *had* asked?"

"They wouldn't have been able to tell, anyway. Viper blocks any sensory information not consistent with the scenario." Again he touched the console. "There's a whole world being run in there—from the inside of Culhane's cell outward."

"How far does it reach?"

"As far as it needs. It invents itself on the fly—generating environments on demand, depending on Culhane's actions. Some of the locales, like the prison, are precise mappings from the real world. Mostly, it's fictitious, although everything Culhane will encounter will seem plausible."

"What if Culhane tries to go someplace it can't simulate—some place *he* knows, but *it* doesn't?"

"He'll find it very difficult to get there. It's the same with people. He won't be allowed to interact with anyone the system can't fake."

Stockard threw the others each a pair of flimsy goggles, like the kind that came in cheap VR games.

"That's the technical side. The political side is that Delhi licensed the basic technology to our airforce, and the flyboys slipped it to the NIC. You can see the attraction."

They snapped on the goggles, which had retractable earplugs in the arms.

"Not really," the intern said. "But go on."

"Think about it. The service is choking with inmates who could be released, if only we knew they weren't going to screw up again. But no clinical tests could ever filter the real monsters; the ones who've read more pysch literature than the shrinks."

"Like Grodin," Wills said.

"Except we didn't have viper back then," Stockard said. "But with it . . . we could have put Grodin to the test. We could have made him think he was

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already free. He'd have tried to kill again—but this time it wouldn't have been for real."

Smart polymer morphed around their eyesockets, blocking the room. The NIC seal appeared, followed by a bewildering geometric test pattern, then the interior of Culhane's cell.

Culhane was sleeping on his bunk.

"So let me get this right," the intern said. "That's what he thinks is happening to him right now? That he's still safe and warm back in his cell? This is too weird."

"It's about to get weirder," Stockard whispered, touch-typing a sequence of commands into the viper. "I'm waking him up. Of course, the machine'll be hijacking all voluntary motor control—but it'll be evoking fake proprioceptive and tactile stimuli in accordance with any movements Culhane thinks he's making."

Culhane woke and climbed out of his bunk, with the rapid motion of an actor in a silent movie.

"What's with the Keystone Kops shit?"

"Deep down in the basal ganglia," Stockard said, "is something called the substantia nigra. Usually damaged in patients with Parkinson's disease. It feeds a stream of electrical pulses to the striatum, part of the motor control center. Turn off those pulses, and the frontal lobe doesn't get any information about elapsed time. Viper simply stimulates the striatum more rapidly than normal, and suppresses the usual signals from the basal ganglia."

"How much faster?"

"Factors of ten to fifteen aren't unusual when there's little motor or linguistic activity."

Culhane was flashing around his cell, running through the routine motor activities of dressing and shaving. Stockard slipped off the goggles and looked at the inmate's recumbent form. Although the paralysis was holding well, minute rapid twitches afflicted his extremities.

Stockard put back the goggles.

Culhane's flickering motions slowed as someone came to the door and spoke to him. The comprehension and generation of speech tied up large tracts of the Broca and Wernicke linguistic centers, necessitating slower stimulus of the frontal-striatal loop.

A correctional officer entered the cell, followed by Warden Wills.

"Good news, Culhane," she said, like a tape being played too fast. "Parole hearing's been pushed forward."

Culhane placed his safety razor down on the basin, foam still lathering his chin. "To when?"

"One hour from now. Try not to screw it up, will you?"

The real Wills said: "That's exactly what I would have said, more or less. How'd you manage that?"

"The viper assimilated hundreds of hours of routine prison security system recordings," Stockard said. "It assembled predictive models for all the major players, using hacked synthespian routines."

They watched the parole hearing, knowing that the outcome had never really been in doubt. Based on the evidence at hand, the committee had no option but to allow Culhane to leave the prison. Of course, things might be different in the real hearing—Culhane's actions in the viper would decide that.

But so far, he hadn't done anything to harm his chances of release.

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* * *

"I'm worried he knows," Stockard said to Wills, much later.

"Just because he hasn't made a mistake yet? Doesn't that kind of suspicion invalidate the whole point of this exercise?"

Stockard didn't answer. It wasn't a question he particularly wanted to think about. She was right, of course: he was treating Culhane as if the inmate was another Grodin, simply because he didn't like the man and because Culhane had made an off-hand remark that might have been completely innocent.

If he called the colonel . . .

No; he crushed the thought, even as the colonel's number wavered in his mind's eye. He had to cling to the hope that Culhane would implicate himself, without Stockard's help.

In the simulation, following his successful passage through the parole board, Culhane had been moved from the MIF to a half-way house. The house was simulated with the same precision as the prison, populated with a cast of characters run by Turing routines, compiled from years of study of real individuals in the correctional system, both inmate and servant. Culhane slipped into this new transitory life with ease. As days of accelerated time passed, he did not put a foot wrong, giving every impression that he was fit to return to normal life, even if he would never be anyone's choice for citizen of the week. Gradually, when days had passed in the MIF, weeks of viper time, Stockard elected to lay a trap.

Stockard did not tell Wills or any of the other officers what was about to happen—it was not required of him to do so, since Culhane's actions were in any case being captured for posterity on the diskette. Instead, he tapped another sequence of commands into the console and waited for the simulation to accommodate his wishes. There was a lapse in security at the half-way house—a plausible sequence of human errors that culminated in Culhane having a perfect opportunity to slip out of the establishment, into the dusk. From there, viper would arrange things so that Culhane would come across a lonely, unguarded house where his past crimes could be repeated anew.

Culhane noticed the lapse, as intended.

Stockard watched, heart thundering. One transgression would be all that it required to ensure Culhane never left the prison.

Instead—after a few minutes of hesitation—Culhane reported the lapse to a correctional officer, and then turned away from the man with a smile ghosting his features.

The colonel wore a T-shirt with a holographic sphinx, wraparound shades keyed into the atrium's infotainment channel. Lounging on a chair next to a fountain, he was chortling at cartoons when Stockard dropped the diskette in his lap.

They had agreed to meet in a fifty-year-old pyramidal hotel in Vegas, still proudly displaying the faded decor of the casino era. There were still enclaves where tourists could gamble, but the stakes were never high enough to attract the old-time high rollers, now that computers could be implanted invisibly in an eyeball.

The colonel examined the diskette dubiously.

"Doesn't look like much, does it. Not much on which to hang a man's entire destiny."

"Save the poetics for when you've done the edit."

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"You don't really like me, do you, Mr. Stockard? And yet you admit I have my uses."

"So does shit paper, but it's not on my Christmas list."

"I shall ascribe your bad manners to your evident ill-health, Mr. Stockard. You look quite poorly."

"I had to induce food poisoning to justify leaving the train in the middle of a viper run. I'm booked into a clinic later today. You'd better have the diskette ready."

"Quality work cannot be rushed," the colonel said, as maddeningly calm as ever. Nothing about the man had changed since the day, years earlier, when he first contacted Stockard, with some interesting information relating to the technology that his own government had recently licensed. It turned out, for instance, that there existed a number of deliberate flaws in the hardware. The diskettes, supposedly protected by impervious encryption algorithms, could in fact be edited by those in the know.

Over the years, Stockard had quietly skimmed his own savings into an emergency fund to cover just such an eventuality: thirty thousand NACU in untraceable notes. It seemed a small price to pay, if it meant never repeating the mistake of Grodin.

The colonel turned the diskette this way and that, as if hoping to divine the answer in the shifting patterns of reflected light playing across its surface. An identical but blank diskette now resided in the viper console. Stockard would swap them again when this copy was edited.

"I will have to network it to my associates. They are fast, but they will need documentation, so that the crime is consistent with what has happened before."

Stockard passed the colonel an envelope thick with forensic evidence culled from Culhane's previous murders. The murder that would be faked in simulation had to incorporate enough points of similarity to seem part of a modus operandi, yet not be a slavish copy.

"How shall we integrate the crime?"

"Shortly after Culhane was transferred to the half-way house," Stockard said, "the simulation gave him a chance to escape. Of course, he didn't take it, because he knew he was being watched. *Now,* though . . ."

"History, or rather the disk, will be rewritten; the temptation will arise again, and this time he will escape." Stockard imagined the colonel mentally assaying these points of importance. "And then, presumably, he will be confronted with the opportunity to murder."

"Not far from the safe-house," Stockard said. "No matter which direction Culhane would have chosen, he was guaranteed to stumble on it. An isolated family house, good white-bread folks, poorly defended, easily infiltrated."

"Culhane enters the house?"

"He'd do it by moonlight. Then kill the family inside. Not just kill." Stockard felt himself shivering, a response that had nothing to do with the air-conditioned atrium. "It has to be sculptural."

"How utterly distasteful." The colonel leaned back in his seat, upraised shades reflecting the light-studded form of an atrium elevator ascending toward infinity. "Good job you're paying me for my services."

He smiled, returning to his cartoons.

The clinic in Vegas ran rapid transfusions and didn't ask too many questions. By the time they were done with Stockard—purging his credit as

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thoroughly as they purged his intestinal tract—it was time to retrieve the diskette from the colonel.

"It's good to have you back among us," Wills said, when he'd returned to the MIF near Modena. "I was worried about you back there."

"Just one of those anaphylactic shock things."

"Good. I just hope we get results on Culhane soon. Don't know how much longer we can keep him under before questions get asked."

"Hopefully not more than a few hours." Stockard took his briefcase from the correctional officer who had just examined it. It was almost empty now; the solitary diskette resting inside arousing no suspicions. "I'll need some time with him alone, though."

One of her team escorted him to the viper room, opened the door, and let him inside.

No visible change had affected Culhane. The IV drip had supplied his nutritional needs and the orderlies had moved him periodically to avoid pressure sores. The headset was still clamped around his skull.

"Sleeping beauty," Stockard whispered.

Satisfied that the door was shut behind him, he ejected the diskette currently in the console and replaced it with the edited copy the colonel had supplied him.

"Now let's see what crimes you couldn't resist."

According to the documentation that had accompanied the viper, swapping a diskette in mid-simulation was as impossible as editing a diskette. But the possibility of committing both acts had been engineered into the system from the outset. The designers had recognized that a system not amenable to corruption was of no use to anyone.

Stockard slipped on a pair of goggles and fell into Culhane's world, accessing the recording of Culhane's actions stored on the diskette. Like someone rewinding a film, he jumped back to the time when Culhane had the chance to slip out of the half-way house.

This time, he took the bait.

Stockard fast-forwarded a few hours, then watched, from a bodyless point of view, as Culhane scoped a lonely colonial farmhouse on the edge of a marsh. Dusk was falling, frogs calling across the still, moonlit waters. A few lights burned in the house; a family at home. In an unlocked boathouse, a knife presented itself to Culhane. He hefted it, dancing at shadows, then turned toward the house. The porch door creaked ajar.

It was a perfect night for sculpture.

Sweating, Stockard replaced the dummy diskette in his briefcase and turned to leave the room.

The pattern of events on the edited diskette—the escape from the half-way house, and the subsequent multiple-killing—were sufficient to ensure the inmate never left captivity again. All that remained was to present the evidence to the parole board and let it make up its own mind as to Culhane's sanity. In a few hours, Stockard would know if his own small sins had been justified.

He reached the door and was ready to open it.

The door faded away. His hand passed through its insubstantiality—and then his hand faded away with the door, along with the rest of the room and the sensation of standing up.

Instead, he was on his back, something clamped painfully around his skull.

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The only thing that hadn't changed was the constant subliminal roar of the train.

"Tampering with Federal evidence," someone whispered; one of several dark figures clustered around him. "A very serious matter. But we never thought you'd really do it, Stockard. Even after what that piece of shit did to your wife."

Another voice: "Which is why we had to be sure."

"Any idea how long you've been in that thing?"

Stockard screamed. He reached up and pulled at the vicelike mass of metal crushing his head, knowing exactly where he was. But his hands did not close around the hard frame of the headset. Instead, they pummeled something soft, yielding.

And then he woke.

He'd fallen asleep next to Catherine, his head embedded in the sweat-sodden cleft of a pillow. Sitting in the armchair by her bedside where he'd fallen asleep the night before, Stockard reached out and took Catherine's bird-thin wrist in his hand.

He'd just had the nightmare again—as, unpredictably, he'd had it every few weeks in the months since the incident with Culhane. Although the details varied, the dream always began with them discovering that he had tampered with the evidence and it always ended with his disgrace.

It hadn't happened like that.

No one had ever suspected that the faked diskette was anything other than the genuine article; most certainly not the parole board, which had voted unanimously to keep Culhane locked away for the rest of his natural life. Which, as it happened, had been little more than four months; before someone performed a little sculpture on the artist himself. Stockard's evidence had been praised as a significant contributory factor in the eventual decision not to release Culhane, and the viper project had been greenlighted for scale-up. Stockard had been forced to decline a promotion to a coveted NIC desk-job.

"I thought the dreams would stop when I kept Culhane inside," Stockard whispered, stroking her wrist, watching Catherine's slow, measured exhalations, mediated by the tiny life-support device implanted in the base of her skull. "I thought that if I kept one monster from getting loose, that would atone for the one that beat me. But you'd have known better, wouldn't you? You'd have known that it never works like that."

Stockard gently brushed Catherine's hair from her eyes, then stood. He looked at the old clock, hanging against faded floral wallpaper still speckled with the tiniest drops of her blood, if one knew where to look. Soon it would be time to leave. He would walk downstairs, fix coffee and then wait for a government-issue car to roll up outside. Then, briefcase in hand, he would stroll out to meet the car and let it take him wherever his special services were required.

Catherine stirred. The specialists said it was nothing one could be hopeful about; not given the harm Grodin had inflicted. But Stockard had never allowed himself to lose all hope.

The telephone by her bedside was set to loudspeaker.

"I'll call you later," he said.

Then he kissed Catherine and went to judge whatever monsters the day had provided. O

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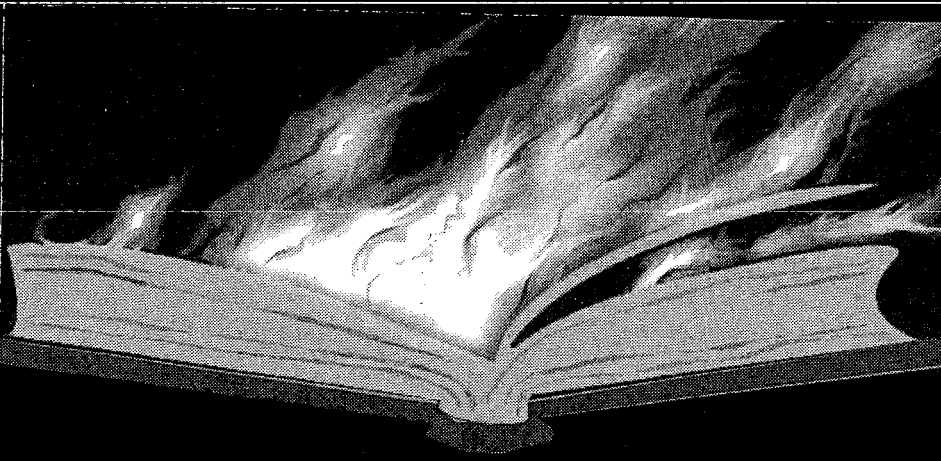

CORRECTING THE RECORD

It's time to burn the history books
Before the robots learn
What we have done.

Let them read history, or our sacred texts
with all the slavery bits, the
war bits, the killing-those-
who-just-don't-measure-up
bits,
and we are finished.

Preserve the tenderness-for-lesser-creatures
bits, the compassion bits,
though they be few,
that we might be kept on.

Will we build them?
Of course we will,
Perfecting in them what
we could not (o far too hard)
in our own selves.

But let us purge the history books,
Before these robots learn
What we have done.

— Timons Esaias

Illustration by Shirley Chan

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Eliot Fintushel

You never know who—or what—will show up for . . .

OPEN MIKE

"So this is what I want to know. No, really! What time is it? Can somebody please tell me what time it is? No, really, cut the rim shots, Mr. Music. Damp that cymbal, will you? What time is it? Nobody gives me a straight answer. Every couple minutes it's a different story. Did you ever notice that?"

He had me doubled over, my face in my ex-date's beer. By me, he was better than the headliner. "Who is this guy? Has he been around before?" I thought I knew everybody in White Plains, but I'd never seen him.

Jake, of Jake's Yoks Spot, just shook his head and shrugged: "Open mike!" I peeled Jake's hand off my knee and let him continue his hello rounds, shoulder to gam, everythingohkaying all the ladies. I just jumped

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back into the laugh stream, my own laugh stream; nobody in this small town dive seemed to appreciate the comic the way I did. Shazam, Jake's bouncer, was positively hostile. That over-the-hill hippie, cape and blue leotard with lightning bolts embroidered on the chest, if his eyes had been lasers, they would have burned a hole through my man's forehead, right through both of their Ray-Bans.

They were the same Ray-Bans, too, with the red frames. Shazam's were a part of his lunatic outfit, though they didn't go too well with the Lone Ranger mask. Personally, I'd never let Shazam into the batter's box. I like guys who know how to dress nice. So it's a good thing he never made the moves on me. The same goes for most guys in this burg.

The comic adjusted his hang and went on: "So I performed my own experiment. Really! A critical experiment. From my home planet, where there is nothing like your *time,* I procured all the necessary parts to build a chronometer, ladies and gentlemen, a super-chronometer, correct to a millionth of a billionth of a nano-second. I turned it on, I looked at it, and I shut it off.

"So now it's settled once and for all, and you can stop all the jawboning. . . . It's two o'clock."

Actually, it was almost midnight. My date—"Is this stuff supposed to be funny?"—had gone to wash his hands about two Budweisers ago and hadn't come back. His loss. Me and guys in this town are just not on the same wavelength. Pretty soon I was going to have to address the question of transportation home, though, and the man on the podium seemed like a good prospect.

I wasn't averse to his looks, six-foot-something-and-a-half with a mop of jet black hair over a puss like . . . well, like a comic's: pretty, but eccentric. A Ken doll's face hot-transferred to a banana skin. And nice threads. There was definitely some magnetism; after every punch line, he smiled at me. And I started smiling back.

"No, really! Somebody should set that clock up there. All the clocks. Set them, and then unplug them. Two AM. Did I say AM? It's two AM exactly."

I wanted to snag him on that punch line. I had to work real hard not to crack up: "Always? Is it always two?" A hint of a drawl. Do you know how to do that, girls? It's like dropping a hanky. It's all in the eyes. Sometimes you can see the blood drain out of their face, and I think I know where it's going.

He was all mine. He turned straight toward me, now that I'd given him the excuse, and for the first time that night, my man missed a beat. After that, his eyes never strayed from my big blues, and thank you very much, Estee Lauder and Maybelline.

Some weisenheimer at a table full of drunken frat bro's was trying to unsizzle our hotline—"Get off the stage, you mortician."—but we didn't budge. At the end of his routine, I let a strap fall over my shoulder while I smiled and applauded, maintaining eye contact, and when I reached to tug it up again, he was MayIjoinyouing me, which I adore in a man. It's so Old School, don't you think?

I'd been looking at my shoulder. My finger was still on the strap. I turned my head to look up at him, and I did it with an expression of startled shyness that I used to practice in the mirror of my compact for hours at a time, every minute worth it.

My mouth is just a little open, my eyebrows arched. You look up, then you

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kind of look down at your bosom like it's the Hope Diamond and he's a jewel thief, and then you look back up again. "Whah, Mr. Rhet Butler, suh . . ." I'm telling you, girls, it's a regular tractor beam. Nobody with a Y chromosome can resist it, even if they were thinking buttercups and choirboys up till then, which I guarantee you they were not.

He wanted me. But I didn't let him sit down yet. "Hey, you were great. Where are you from?"

The guy blushed. "I don't know what to say. I'm having your baby."

Isn't that crazy? I mean, this guy is a complete crackup. He's always on. This is my type one hundred percent, tonight at least. It's time to open the parlor door. "Sit down. You make me laugh. I love what you do."

So he sits down, and I do the looking around the room thing to give him a chance to take me in at close range, thank you, L'oreal Colorvive, thank you Cover Girl Long 'n Lush. I've got him. He's mooning at me, leaning forward and cocking his head like a puppy. "May I lick you?"

I nearly fell out of my chair. People gawked. I didn't care, know what I mean? I was laughing so hard, I was just trying not to wet my panties. "Honestly, where are you from?"

"Outer space."

"I know that! Where in outer space?"

"Toledo." Isn't that the limit? This guy has me on the ropes. When I recover bladder control, he says, "Not the one in Andromeda. It's in Cepheus, in the Beta system. You know Cepheus?"

"Sure. Like the back of my hand. You gonna take me home or what, funny man?"

"This isn't your home?"

"Cut it out! You're killing me!"

"Oh my God! How can I help?"

I was actually on the floor, holding onto my chair, gasping for breath. He absolutely had my number. "Stop it! This guy is killing me, I swear it."

Suddenly, he stood up from the table in a panic. He was dodging and looking around the room, all stop-action, like the Keystone Cops, and I was sitting in a puddle. Just then the frat bro' jerk, all Guess? and Calvin Kleins, got the inspiration to stagger by and play hero.

He shoves his phthistic chest into Mr. Open Mike and burps: "You're a pretty funny guy, aren't you?"

"Help her. She's dying."

"Is the funny guy bothering you, sweetheart?"

Once in a while I was managing to inhale.

Then my comic fell into the drunk's arms. ". . . I'm pregnant!"

"You're whaa. . . ?"

Now everybody was laughing except for Open Mike and the drunk, and my man played it like nobody I've ever seen. Usually, if one person laughs, say, a gag man will give him the fish eye; that makes the person laugh harder, and then the whole crowd gets to yokking, and the gag man will just stand still and wait, which can bring the house down. But Open Mike did us a new one. "Stop it! I'm pregnant, I said! She's the father. You saw her laughing. Can't you restrain yourselves?" He was shrieking and wiggling like Milton Berle in drag.

Then Open Mike says to me, and he makes it sound so real I almost believe it, "I'm truly sorry. I have to go. I'm going into labor. I hope you can get help."

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Shazam busts through then, dropping his cash box and his rubber stamp. He shoulders the customers out of his way. When Open Mike sees Shazam coming at him, he make a dash for the WC. Shazam is shouting, "You! Kfizzsts Pukhh!!"—some gibberish name that sounds like a cat vomiting—"I knew you'd try this place sooner or later." Then Shazam bellows at all of us: "Stop yokking, you hyenas, or you'll give him twins." He yells after Open Mike: "I'm taking you in, Pukhh."

"What about my baby?" the guy says. He's halfway into the WC. Everyone is in stitches now, and crazy Mike is wiggling like he is being machine gunned or gang banged.

"You should have thought of that when you jumped the time wall, Kfizzts Pukhh." Time wall!

That's when the fire started.

"But no one would laugh at me in Toledo. Was I supposed to hang around and be barren forever?"

Somebody must have squirted lighter fluid in circles around Open Mike, an incredible effect. I don't know how they did it up so close like that. It looked like Jake wasn't even in on it; he was pissed bigtime. He grabbed his anemic little fire extinguisher, and it spat foam all over everything, including Mike and Shazam, who I'll bet dollars to diaphragms the funny man had paid to shill.

When the fire was out, Open Mike was gone, Shazam was gone, Jake looked like a cumulus cloud, and the frat bro' was in my lap. We looked all over for Jake and Shazam, including in the WC, where I saw some graffiti with my name in it—for which, since then, you can bet that I paid back that meatless hick ex-date of mine—but there wasn't a sign of them.

Nobody around here ever saw either of them again.

He was a funny guy, that Open Mike. I never laughed so hard. I wish they'd open the Yok Spot up again. For the past month, every time you go by there it's swarming with three kinds of uniforms and four kinds of cars, City, County, State, and Fed. They won't even let Jake in. I don't know what the beef is. It wasn't even that big of a fire.

Oh yeah, the drunk took me home, but I couldn't make him stay past two. He put on his dumb, red-rimmed Ray-bans and skedaddled. As if I care! He kept trying to make me laugh, see, but he was a dud. His last line—"I gotta get back to Toledo before they get wise; look what they done to Kfizzsts Pukhh"—was a regular sleeping pill.

I just want to find a decent dresser who's funny. Is that too much to ask? A couple of kids. A house in the suburbs. With looks like mine, it'd be a shame to wind up an old maid, and the clock is ticking, if you know what I mean. It is not always two AM, Mike.

Maybe I'll move to New York. O

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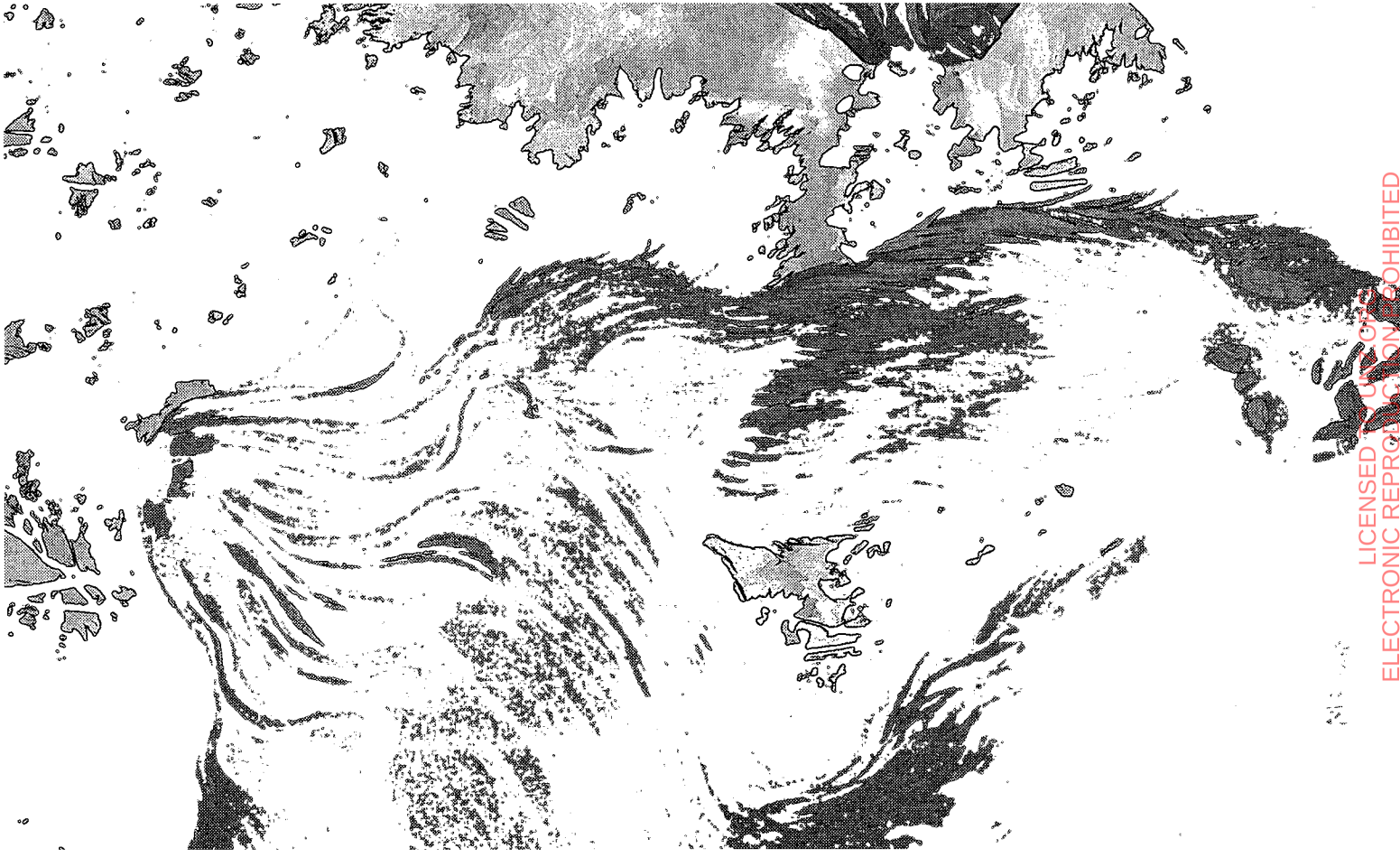

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Mike Resnick

HUNTING THE SNARK

Mike Resnick's numerous trips to Africa have given rise to such memorable projects as the Hugo- and Nebula-award winning novella, "Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge," and the multiple Hugo-award winning Kirinyaga series. With Gardner Dozois, he also edited an anthology of stories, *Future Earths: Under African Skies*, about that alluring continent. Perhaps because of this interest, "Gardner challenged me to write the ultimate science fiction hunting story." The following tale of terror and suspense is the result.

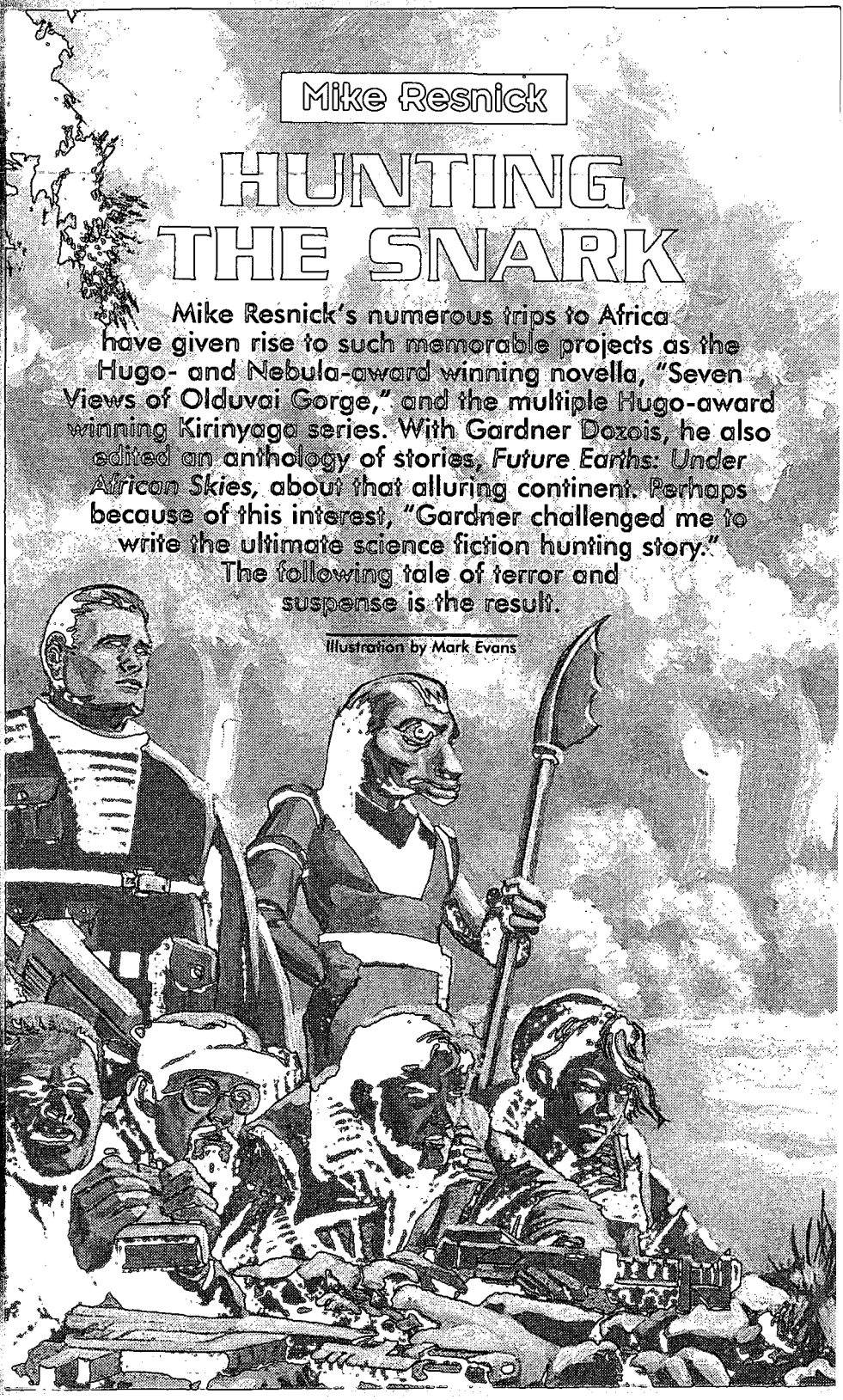

Illustration by Mark Evans

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December 1999

Believe me, the last thing we ever expected to find was a Snark.
And I'm just as sure we were the last thing he ever expected to meet.
I wish I could tell you we responded to the situation half as well as he did. But maybe I should start at the beginning. Trust me: I'll get to the Snark soon enough.

My name's Karamojo Bell. (Well, actually it's Daniel Mathias Bellman. I've never been within five thousand light years of the Karamojo district back on Earth. But when I found out I was a distant descendant of the legendary hunter, I decided to appropriate his name, since I'm in the same business and I thought it might impress the clients. Turned out I was wrong; in my entire career, I met three people who had heard of him, and none of them went on safari with me. But I kept it anyway. There are a lot of Daniels walking around; at least I'm the only Karamojo.)

At that time I worked for Silinger & Mahr, the oldest and best-known firm in the safari business. True, Silinger died sixty-three years ago and Mahr followed him six years later and now it's run by a faceless corporation back on Deluros VIII, but they had better luck with their name than I had with mine, so they never changed it.

We were the most expensive company in the business, but we were worth it. Hundreds of worlds have been hunted out over the millennia, but people with money will always pay to have first crack at territory no one else has set foot on or even seen. A couple of years ago the company purchased a ten-planet hunting concession in the newly opened Albion Cluster, and so many of our clients wanted to be the first to hunt virgin worlds that we actually held drawings to see who'd get the privilege. Silinger & Mahr agreed to supply one professional hunter per world and allow a maximum of four clients per party, and the fee was (get ready for it!) twenty million credits. Or eight million Maria Theresa dollars, if you don't have much faith in the credit—and out here on the Frontier, not a lot of people do.

We pros wanted to hunt new worlds every bit as much as the clients did. They were parceled out by seniority, and as seventh in line, I was assigned Dodgson IV, named after the woman who'd first charted it a dozen years ago. Nine of us had full parties. The tenth had a party of one—an incredibly wealthy man who wasn't into sharing.

Now, understand: I didn't take out the safari on my own. I was in charge, of course, but I had a crew of twelve blue-skinned humanoid Dabihs from Kakkab Kastu IV. Four were gunbearers for the clients. (I didn't have one myself; I never trusted anyone else with my weapons.) To continue: one was the cook, three were skinners (and it takes a lot more skill than you think to skin an alien animal you've never seen before without spoiling the pelt), and three were camp attendants. The twelfth was my regular tracker, whose name—Chajinka—always sounded like a sneeze.

We didn't really need a pilot—after all, the ship's navigational computer could start from half a galaxy away and land on top of a New Kenya shilling—but our clients were paying for luxury, and Silinger & Mahr made sure they got it. So in addition to the Dabihs, we also had our own personal pilot, Captain Kosha Mbele, who'd spent two decades flying one-man fighter ships in the war against the Sett.

The hunting party itself consisted of four business associates, all wealthy beyond my wildest dreams if not their own. There was Willard Marx, a real estate magnate who'd developed the entire Roosevelt planetary system; Jaxon Pollard, who owned matching chains of cut-rate supermarkets and

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upscale bakeries that did business on more than a thousand worlds; Philemon Desmond, the CEO of Far London's largest bank—with branches in maybe two hundred systems—and his wife, Ramona, a justice on that planet's Supreme Court.

I don't know how the four of them met, but evidently they'd all come from the same home world and had known each other for a long time. They began pooling their money in business ventures early on, and just kept going from one success to the next. Their most recent killing had come on Silverstrike, a distant mining world. Marx was an avid hunter who had brought trophies back from half a dozen worlds, the Desmonds had always wanted to go on safari, and Pollard, who would have preferred a few weeks on Calliope or one of the other pleasure planets, finally agreed to come along so that the four of them could celebrate their latest billion together.

I took an instant dislike to Marx, who was too macho by half. Still, that wasn't a problem; I wasn't being paid to enjoy his company, just to find him a couple of prize trophies that would look good on his wall, and he seemed competent enough.

The Desmonds were an interesting pair. She was a pretty woman who went out of her way to look plain, even severe; a well-read woman who insisted on quoting everything she'd read, which made you wonder which she enjoyed more, reading in private or quoting in public. Philemon, her husband, was a mousy little man who drank too much, drugged too much, smoked too much, seemed in awe of his wife, and actually wore a tiny medal he'd won in a school track meet some thirty years earlier—probably a futile attempt to impress Mrs. Desmond, who remained singularly unimpressed.

Pollard was just a quiet, unassuming guy who'd lucked into money and didn't pretend to be any more sophisticated than he was—which, in my book, made him considerably more sophisticated than his partners. He seemed constantly amazed that they had actually talked him into coming along. He'd packed remedies for sunburn, diarrhea, insect bites, and half a hundred other things that could befall him, and jokingly worried about losing what he called his prison pallor.

We met on Braxton II, our regional headquarters, then took off on the six-day trip to Dodgson IV. All four of them elected to undergo DeepSleep, so Captain Mbele and I put them in their pods as soon as we hit light speeds, and woke them about two hours before we landed.

They were starving—I know the feeling; DeepSleep slows the metabolism to a crawl, but of course it doesn't stop it or you'd be dead, and the first thing you want to do when you wake up is eat—so Mbele shagged the Dabihs out of the galley, where they spent most of their time, and had the cook prepare a meal geared to human tastes. As soon as they finished eating, they began asking questions about Dodgson IV.

"We've been in orbit for the past hour, while the ship's computer has been compiling a detailed topographical map of the planet," I explained. "We'll land as soon as I find the best location for the base camp."

"So what's this world like?" asked Desmond, who had obviously failed to read all the data we'd sent to him.

"I've never set foot on it," I replied. "No one has." I smiled. "That's why you're paying so much."

"How do we know there's any game to be found there, then?" asked Marx pugnaciously.

"There's game, all right," I assured him. "The Pioneer who charted it

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claims her sensors pinpointed four species of carnivore and lots of herbivores, including one that goes about four tons."

"But she never landed?" he persisted.

"She had no reason to," I said. "There was no sign of sentient life, and there are millions of worlds out there still to be charted."

"She'd damned well better have been right about the animals," grumbled Marx. "I'm not paying this much to look at a bunch of trees and flowers."

"I've hunted three other oxygen worlds that Karen Dodgson charted," I said, "and they've always delivered what she promised."

"Do people actually hunt on chlorine and ammonia worlds?" asked Pollard.

"A few. It's a highly specialized endeavor. If you want to know more about it after the safari is over, I'll put you in touch with the right person back at headquarters."

"I've hunted a couple of chlorine worlds," interjected Marx.

Sure you have, I thought.

"Great sport," he added.

When you have to live with your client for a few weeks or months, you don't call him a braggart and a liar to his face, but you do file the information away for future reference.

"This Karen Dodgson—she's the one the planet's named for?" asked Ramona Desmond.

"It's a prerogative of the Pioneer Corps," I answered. "The one who charts a world gets to name it anything he or she wants." I paused and smiled. "They're not known for their modesty. Usually they name it after themselves."

"Dodgson," she said again. "Perhaps we'll find a Jabberwock, or a Cheshire Cat, or even a Snark."

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

"That was Lewis Carroll's real name: Charles Dodgson."

"I've never heard of him," I replied.

"He wrote 'Jabberwocky' and *The Hunting of the Snark,* along with the Alice books." She stared at me. "Surely you're read them."

"I'm afraid not."

"No matter," she said with a shrug. "It was just a joke. Not a very funny one."

In retrospect, I wish we'd found a Jabberwock.

"Just the place for a Snark!" the Bellman cried,
As he landed his crew with care;
Supporting each man on the top of the tide
By a finger entwined in his hair.

Dodgson IV was lush and green, with huge rolling savannahs, thick forests with trees growing hundreds of feet high, lots of large inland lakes, a trio of freshwater oceans, an atmosphere slightly richer than Galactic Standard, and a gravity that was actually a shade lighter than Standard.

While the Dabihs were setting up camp and erecting the self-contained safari Bubbles near the ship, I sent Chajinka off to collect possible foodstuffs, then took them to the ship's lab for analysis. It was even better than I'd hoped.

"I've got good news," I announced when I clambered back out of the ship.

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"There are at least seventeen edible plant species. The bark of those trees with the golden blossoms is also edible. The water's not totally safe, but it's close enough so that if we irradiate it it'll be just fine."

"I didn't come here to eat fruits and berries or whatever the hell Blue Boy found out there," said Marx gruffly. "Let's go hunting."

"I think it would be better for you and your friends to stay in camp for a day while Chajinka and I scout out the territory and see what's out there. Just unwind from the trip and get used to the atmosphere and the gravity."

"Why?" asked Desmond. "What's the difference if we go out today or tomorrow?"

"Once I see what we're up against, I'll be able to tell you which weapons to take. And while we know there are carnivores, we have no idea whether they're diurnal or nocturnal or both. No sense spending all day looking for a trophy that only comes out at night."

"I hadn't thought of that." Desmond shrugged. "You're the boss."

I took Captain Mbele aside and suggested he do what he could to keep them amused—tell them stories of past safaris, make them drinks, do whatever he could to entertain them while Chajinka and I did a little reconnoitering and learned what we'd be up against.

"It looks pretty normal to me," said Mbele. "A typical primitive world."

"The sensors say there's a huge biomass about two miles west of here," I replied. "With that much meat on the hoof, there should be a lot of predators. I want to see what they can do before I take four novices into the bush."

"Marx brags about all the safaris he's been on," complained Mbele. "Why not take the Great White Hunter with you?"

"Nice try," I said. "But I make the decisions once we're on the ground. You're stuck with him."

"Thanks a lot."

"Maybe he's been on other safaris, but he's a novice on Dodgson IV, and as far as I'm concerned that's all that counts."

"Well, if it comes to that, so are you."

"I'm getting paid to risk my life. He's paying for me to make sure he gets his trophies and doesn't risk *his*." I looked around. "Where the hell did Chajinka sneak off to?"

"I think he's helping the cook."

"He's got his own food," I said irritably. "He doesn't need ours." I turned in the direction of the cooking Bubble and shouted: "Chajinka, get your blue ass over here!"

The Dabih looked up at the sound of my voice, smiled, and pointed to his ears.

"Then get your goddamned t-pack!" I said. "We've got work to do."

He smiled again, wandered off, and returned a moment later with his spear and his t-pack, the translating mechanism that allowed Man and Dabih (actually, Man and just about anything, with the proper programming) to converse with one another in Terran.

"Ugly little creature," remarked Mbele, indicating Chajinka.

"I didn't pick him for his looks."

"Is he really that good?"

"The little bastard could track a billiard ball down a crowded highway," I replied. "And he's got more guts than most Men I know."

"You don't say," said Mbele in tones that indicated he still considered Dabihs one step up—if that—from the animals we had come to hunt.

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"His form is ungainly—his intellect small—"
(So the Bellman would often remark)—
"But his courage is perfect! And that, after all,
Is the thing that one needs with a Snark."

I'm not much for foot-slogging when transportation is available, but it was going to take the Dabihs at least a day to assemble the safari vehicle and there was no sense hanging around camp waiting for it. So off we went, Chajinka and me, heading due west toward a water hole the computer had mapped. We weren't out to shoot anything, just to see what there was and what kind of weaponry our clients would need when we went out hunting the next morning.

It took us a little more than an hour to reach the water hole, and once there we hid behind some heavy bush about fifty yards away from it. There was a small herd of brown-and-white herbivores slaking their thirst, and as they left, a pair of huge red animals, four or five tons apiece, came down to drink. Then there were four or five more small herds of various types of grass-eaters. I had just managed to get comfortable when I heard a slight scrabbling noise. I turned and saw Chajinka pick up a slimy five-inch green worm, study its writhing body for a moment, then pop it into his mouth and swallow it. He appeared thoughtful for a moment, as if savoring the taste, then nodded his head in approval, and began looking for more.

Once upon a time that would have disgusted me, but I'd been with Chajinka for more than a decade and I was used to his eating habits. I kept looking for predators, and finally asked if he'd spotted any.

He waited for the t-pack to translate, then shook his head. "Night eaters, maybe," he whispered back.

"I never saw a world where *all* the carnivores were nocturnal," I answered. "There have to be some diurnal hunters, and this is the spot they should be concentrating on."

"Then where are they?"

"You're the tracker," I said. "You tell me."

He sighed deeply—a frightening sound if you're not used to Dabihs. A few of the animals at the water hole spooked and ran off thirty or forty yards, raising an enormous cloud of reddish dust. When they couldn't spot where the noise had come from, they warily returned to finish drinking.

"You wait here," he whispered. "I will find the predators."

I nodded my agreement. I'd watched Chajinka stalk animals on a hundred worlds, and I knew that I'd just be a hindrance. He could travel as silently as any predator, and he could find cover where I would swear none existed. If he had to freeze, he could stand or squat motionless for up to fifteen minutes. If an insect was crawling across his face, he wouldn't even shut an eye if it was in the insect's path. So maybe he regarded worms and insects as delicacies, and maybe he had only the vaguest notion of personal hygiene, but in his element—and we were in it now—there was no one of any species better suited for the job.

I sat down, adjusted my contact lenses to Telescopic, and scanned the horizon for the better part of ten minutes, going through a couple of smokeless cigarettes in the process. Lots of animals, all herbivores, came by to drink. Almost too many, I decided, because at this rate the water hole would be nothing but a bed of mud in a few days.

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I was just about to start on a third cigarette when Chajinka was beside me again, tapping me on the shoulder.

"Come with me," he said.

"You found something?"

He didn't answer, but straightened up and walked out into the open, making no attempt to hide his presence. The animals at the water hole began bleating and bellowing in panic and raced off, some low to the ground, some zigzagging with every stride, and some with enormous leaps. Soon all of them vanished in the thick cloud of dust they had raised.

I followed him for about half a mile, and then we came to it: a dead catlike animal, obviously a predator. It had a tan pelt, and I estimated its weight at three hundred pounds. It had the teeth of a killer, and its front and back claws were clearly made for rending the flesh of its prey. Its broad tail was covered with bony spikes. It was too muscular to be built for sustained speed, but its powerful shoulders and haunches looked deadly efficient for short charges of up to one hundred yards.

"Dead maybe seven hours," said Chajinka. "Maybe eight."

I didn't mind that it was dead. I minded that its skull and body were crushed. And I especially minded that there'd been no attempt to eat it.

"Read the signs," I said. "Tell me what happened."

"Brown cat," said Chajinka, indicating the dead animal, "made a kill this morning. His stomach is still full. He was looking for a place to lie up, out of the sun. Something killed him."

"*What* killed him?"

He pointed to some oblong tracks, not much larger than a human's. "This one is the killer."

"Where did he go after he killed the brown cat?"

He examined the ground once more, then pointed to the northeast. "That way."

"Can we find him before dark?"

Chajinka shook his head. "He left a long time ago. Four, five, six hours."

"Let's go back to the water hole," I said. "I want you to see if he left any tracks there."

Our presence frightened yet another herd of herbivores away, and Chajinka examined the ground.

Finally he straightened up. "Too many animals have come and gone."

"Make a big circle around the water hole," I said. "Maybe a quarter mile. See if there are any tracks there."

He did as I ordered, and I fell into step behind him. We'd walked perhaps half the circumference when he stopped.

"Interesting," he said.

"What is?"

"There were brown cats here early this morning," he said, pointing to the ground. "Then the killer of the brown cat came along—you see, here, his print overlays that of a cat—and they fled." He paused. "An entire family of brown cats—at least four, perhaps five—fled from a single animal that hunts alone."

"You're sure he's a solitary hunter?"

He studied the ground again. "Yes. He walks alone. Very interesting."

It was more than interesting.

There was a lone animal out there that was higher on the food chain than the three hundred-pound brown cats. It had frightened away an entire pod

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of large predators, and—this was the part I didn't like—it didn't kill just for food.

Hunters read signs, and they listen to their trackers, but mostly they tend to trust their instincts. We'd been on Dodgson IV less than five hours, and I was already getting a bad feeling.

"I kind of expected you'd be bringing back a little something exotic for dinner," remarked Jaxon Pollard when we returned to camp.

"Or perhaps a trophy," chimed in Ramona Desmond.

"I've got enough trophies, and you'll want to shoot your own."

"You don't sound like a very enthusiastic hunter," she said.

"You're paying to do the hunting," I replied. "My job is to back you up and step in if things get out of hand. As far as I'm concerned, the ideal safari is one on which I don't fire a single shot."

"Sounds good to me," said Marx. "What are we going after tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?" he repeated. "What the hell were you doing all afternoon?"

"Scouting the area."

"This is like pulling teeth," complained Marx. "What did you find?"

"I think we may have found signs of Mrs. Desmond's Snark, for lack of a better name."

Suddenly everyone was interested.

"A Snark?" said Ramona Desmond delightedly. "What did it look like?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It's bipedal, but I've no idea how many limbs it has—probably four. More than that is pretty rare in large animals anywhere in the galaxy. Based on the depth of the tracks, Chajinka thinks it may go anywhere from two hundred and fifty to four hundred pounds."

"That's not so much," said Marx. "I've hunted bigger."

"I'm not through," I said. "In a land filled with game, it seems to have scared the other predators out of the area." I paused. "Well, actually, that could be a misstatement."

"You mean it hasn't scared them off?" asked Ramona, now thoroughly confused.

"No, they're gone. But I called them *other* predators, and I don't know for a fact that our Snark is a predator. He killed a huge, catlike creature, but he didn't eat it."

"What does that imply?" asked Ramona.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. It could be that he was defending his territory. Or . . . " I let the sentence hang while I considered its implications.

"Or what?"

"Or he could simply enjoy killing things."

"That makes two of us," said Marx with a smile. "We'll go out and kill ourselves a Snark tomorrow morning."

"Not tomorrow," I said firmly.

"Why the hell not?" he asked pugnaciously.

"I make it a rule never to go after dangerous game until I know more about it than it knows about me," I answered. "Tomorrow we'll go out shooting meat for the pot and see if we can learn a little more about the Snark."

"I'm not paying millions of credits to shoot a bunch of cud-chewing alien cattle!" snapped Marx. "You've found something that practically screams 'Superb Hunting!' I vote that we go after it in the morning."

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"I admire your enthusiasm and your courage, Mr. Marx," I said. "But this isn't a democracy. I've got the only vote that counts, and since it's my job to return you all safe and sound at the end of this safari, we're not going after the Snark until we know more about it."

He didn't say another word, but I could tell that at that moment he'd have been just as happy to shoot me as the Snark.

Before we set out the next morning, I inspected the party's weapons.

"Nice laser rifle," I said, examining Desmond's brand new pride and joy.

"It ought to be," he said. "It cost fourteen thousand credits. It's got night sights, a vision enhancer, an anti-shake stock. . . ."

"Bring out your projectile rifle and your shotgun, too," I said. "We have to test all the weapons."

"But I'm only going to use *this* rifle," he insisted.

I almost hated to break the news to him.

"In my professional opinion, Dodgson IV has a B3 biosystem," I said. "I already registered my findings via subspace transmission from the ship last night." He looked confused. "For sport hunting purposes, that means you have to use a non-explosive-projectile weapon with a maximum of a .450 grain bullet until the classification is changed."

"But—"

"Look," I interrupted. "We have fusion bombs that can literally blow this planet apart. We have intelligent bullets that will find an animal at a distance of ten miles, respond to evasive maneuvering, and not contact the target until an instant kill is guaranteed. We've got molecular imploders that can turn an enemy brigade into jelly. Given the game we're after, none of those weapons would qualify for use as sport hunting. I know, we're only talking about a laser rifle in your case, but you don't want to start off the safari by breaking the law, and I'm sure as a sportsman you want to give the animal an even break."

He looked dubious, especially about the even break part, but finally he went back to his Bubble and brought out the rest of his arsenal.

I gathered the four of them around me.

"Your weapons have been packed away for a week," I said. "Their settings may have been affected by the ship's acceleration, and this world's gravity is different, however minimally, from your own. So before we start, I want to give everyone a chance to adjust their sights." *And,* I added to myself, *let's see if any of you can hit a non-threatening target at forty yards, just so I'll know what I'm up against.*

"I'll set up targets in the hollow down by the river," I continued, "and I'll ask you to come down one at a time." *No sense letting the poorer shots get humiliated in front of the better ones—always assuming there* are *any better ones.*

I took a set of the most basic targets out of the cargo hold. Once I reached the hollow, I placed four of them where I wanted them, activated the antigrav devices, and when they were gently bobbing and weaving about six feet above the ground, I called for Marx, who showed up a moment later.

"Okay, Mr. Marx," I said. "Have you adjusted your sights?"

"I *always* take care of my weapons," he said as if the question had been an insult.

"Then let's see what you can do."

He smiled confidently, raised his rifle, looked along the sights, pulled the

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trigger, and blew two targets to pieces, then repeated the procedure with his shotgun.

"Nice shooting," I said.

"Thanks," he replied with a look that said: *of course* I'm a crack shot. I told you so, didn't I?

Desmond was next. He raised his rifle to his shoulder, took careful aim, and missed, then missed three more times.

I took the rifle, lined up the sights, and fired. The bullet went high and to the right, burying itself in a tree trunk. I adjusted the sights and took another shot. This time I hit a target dead center.

"Okay, try it now," I said, handing the rifle back to Desmond.

He missed four more times. He missed sitting. He missed prone. He missed using a rest for the barrel. Then he tried the shotgun, and missed twice more before he finally nailed a target. Then, for good measure, he totally misused his laser rifle, trying to pinpoint the beam rather than sweep the area, and missed yet again. We were both relieved when his session ended.

His wife was a little better; she hit the target on her third try with the rifle and her second with the shotgun. She swept the area with her laser rifle, wiping out all the remaining targets.

Pollard should have been next, but he didn't show up, and I went back to camp to get him. He was sitting down with the others, sipping a cup of coffee.

"You're next, Mr. Pollard," I said.

"I'm just going to take holos," he replied, holding up his camera.

"You're sure, Jaxon?" asked Desmond.

"I don't think I'd enjoy killing things," he replied.

"Then what the hell are you doing here?" demanded Marx.

Pollard smiled. "I'm here because you nagged incessantly, Willard. Besides, I've never been on a safari before, and I enjoy taking holographs."

"All right," I said. "But I don't want you wandering more than twenty yards from me at any time."

"No problem," said Pollard. "I don't want *them* killing me any more than I want to kill *them*."

I told his gunbearer to stay behind and help with the camp and the cooking. You'd have thought I'd slapped him in the face, but he agreed to do as he was ordered.

We clambered into the vehicle and got to the water hole in about half an hour. Within five minutes Marx had coolly and efficiently brought down a pair of spiral-horned tan-and-brown herbivores with one bullet each. Then, exercising his right to name any species that he was the first to shoot, he dubbed them Marx's Gazelles.

"What now?" asked Desmond. "We certainly don't need any more meat for the next few days."

"I'll send the vehicle back to camp for the skinners. They'll bring back the heads and pelts as well as the best cuts of meat, and I'll have them tie the rest of the carcasses to some nearby trees."

"Why?"

"Bait," said Marx.

"Mr. Marx is right. *Something* will come along to feed on them. The smell of blood might bring the catlike predators back. Or, if we're lucky, maybe the Snark will come back and we'll be able to learn a little more about him."

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"And what do *we* do in the meantime?" asked Desmond in petulant tones.

"It's up to you," I said. "We can stay here until the vehicle returns, we can march back to camp, or we can footslog to that swamp about four miles to the north and see if there's anything interesting up there."

"Like a Snark?" asked Ramona.

"Five Men and four Dabihs walking across four miles of open savannah aren't about to sneak up and surprise anything. But we're not part of the ecological system. None of the animals will be programmed to recognize us as predators, so there's always a chance—if he's there to begin with—that the Snark will stick around out of curiosity or just plain stupidity."

It was the answer they wanted to hear, so they decided to march to the swamp. Pollard must have taken fifty holos along the way. Desmond complained about the heat, the humidity, the terrain, and the insects. Ramona stuck a chip that read the text of a book into her ear and didn't utter a word until we reached the swamp. Marx just lowered his head and walked.

When we got there we came upon a small herd of herbivores, very impressive-looking beasts, going about five hundred pounds apiece. The males possessed fabulous horns, perhaps sixty inches long, with a triple twist in them. The horns looked like they were made of crystal, and they acted as a prism, separating the sunlight into a series of tiny rainbows.

"My God, look at them!" said Pollard, taking holographs as fast as he could.

"They're magnificent!" whispered Ramona Desmond.

"I'd like one of those," said Marx, studying the herd.

"You took the gazelles," I noted. "Mr. Desmond has first shot."

"I don't want it," said Desmond nervously.

"All right," I said. "Mrs. Desmond, you have first shot."

"I'd never kill anything so beautiful," she replied.

"No," muttered Desmond so softly that she couldn't hear him. "You'd just throw them into jail."

"Then it's Mr. Marx's shot," I said. "I'd suggest you take the fellow on the far right. He doesn't have the longest horns, but he's got the best-matched set. Let's get a little closer."

I turned to the others as Marx took his rifle from his gunbearer and loaded it. "You stay here."

I signaled to Chajinka to take a circuitous approach. Marx, displaying the proper crouching walk, followed him, and I brought up the rear. (A hunter learns early on *never* to get between a client and the game. Either that, or he keeps a prosthetic ear company in business.)

When we'd gotten to within thirty yards, I decided we were close enough and nodded to Marx. He slowly raised his rifle and took aim. I could tell he was going for a heart shot rather than take the chance of ruining the head. It was a good strategy, always assuming that the heart was where he thought it was.

Marx took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and began squeezing the trigger.

And just as he did so, a brilliantly colored avian flew past, shrieking wildly. The horned buck jumped, startled, just as Marx's rifle exploded. The rest of the herd bolted in all directions at the sound of the shot, and before Marx could get off a second shot the buck bellowed in pain, spun around, and vanished into the nearby bush.

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"Come on!" said Marx excitedly, jumping up and running after the buck. "I know I hit him! He won't get far!"

I grabbed him as he hurtled past. "You're not going anywhere, Mr. Marx!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"There's a large, dangerous, wounded animal in the bush," I said. "I can't let you go in after it."

"I'm as good a shot as you are!" he snapped. "It was just a fluke that that goddamned bird startled me. You know that!"

"Look," I said. "I'm not thrilled going into heavy bush after a wounded animal that's carrying a pair of five-foot swords on its head, but that's what I get paid to do. I can't look for him and keep an eye on you as well."

"But—"

"You say you've been on safari before," I said. "That means you know the rules."

He muttered and he cursed, but he *did* know the rules, and he rejoined the rest of the party while Chajinka and I vanished into the bush in search of our wounded prey.

The swamp smelled of rotting vegetation. We followed the blood spoor on leaves and bushes through two hundred yards of mud that sucked at the Dabih's feet and my boots, and then, suddenly, it vanished. I saw a little hillock a few yards off to the right, where the grass was crushed flat, small branches were broken, and flowers were broken off their stems. Chajinka studied the signs for a full minute, then looked up.

"The Snark," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"He was hiding, watching us," answered Chajinka. He pointed to the ground. "The wounded animal lay down here. You see the blood? The Snark was over there. Those are his tracks. When the animal lay down, the Snark saw it was too weak to get up again, but still dangerous. He circled behind it. See—here is where he went. Then he leaped upon it and killed it."

"How?"

Chajinka shrugged. "I cannot tell. But he lifted it and carried it off."

"Could he lift an animal that big?"

"He did."

"He can't be more that a few hundred yards ahead of us," I said. "What do you think? Can we catch up with him?"

"You and I? Yes."

Every now and then, when my blood was up, Chajinka had to remind me that I wasn't hunting for my own pleasure. Yes, was the implication, he and I could catch up with the Snark. Marx might not be a hindrance. But there was no way we could take Pollard and the Desmonds through the swamp, keep an eye out for predators, and hope to make up any ground on the Snark—and of course I couldn't leave them alone while we went after the Snark with Marx.

"All right," I said with a sigh. "Let's get back and tell them what happened."

Marx went ballistic. He ranted and cursed for a good three minutes, and by the end of it, I felt he was ready to declare a blood feud against this trophy thief.

When he finally calmed down, I left Chajinka behind to see if he could learn anything more about the Snark while the rest of us began marching back to the water hole, where the vehicle was waiting for us.

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"We have sailed many months, we have sailed many weeks,
(Four weeks to the month you may mark),
But never as yet ('tis your Captain who speaks)
Have we caught the least glimpse of a Snark!"

Mbele had himself a good laugh when we got back to camp, hot and tired and hungry.

"You keep talking about the Snark as if it exists!" he said in amusement. "It's an imaginary beast in a children's poem."

"Snark is just a convenient name for it," I said. "We can call it anything you like."

"Call it absent," he said. "No one's seen it."

"Right," I said. "And I suppose when you close your eyes, the whole galaxy vanishes."

"I never thought about it," admitted Mbele. "But it probably does." He paused thoughtfully. "At least, I certainly hope so. It makes me feel necessary."

"Look!" I exploded. "There's a dead three hundred-pound killer cat out there, and a missing antelope that was even bigger!" I glared at him. "*I* didn't kill one and steal the other. Did *you?*"

He swallowed his next rejoinder and gave me a wide berth for the rest of the day.

Chajinka trotted into camp the next morning and signaled to me. I walked over and joined him.

"Did you learn anything?" I asked.

"It is an interesting animal," he said.

I grimaced, for as everyone knows, the Dabihs are masters of understatement.

"Come, listen, my men, while I tell you again
The five unmistakable marks
By which you may know, wheresoever you go,
The warranted genuine Snarks."

I gathered the hunting party around me.

"Well," I announced, "we know a little more about the Snark now than we did yesterday." I paused to watch their reactions. Everyone except Desmond seemed interested; Desmond looked like he wished he were anywhere else.

"Chajinka has been to the tree where we tied the dead meat animals," I continued.

"And?" said Marx.

"The ropes were untied. Not cut or torn apart or bitten through; untied. So we know that the Snark either has fingers, or some damned effective appendages. And some meat was missing from the carcasses."

"All right," said Ramona. "We know he can untie knots. What else?"

"We know he's a carnivore," I said. "We weren't sure about that yesterday."

"So what?" asked Marx. "There are millions of carnivores in the galaxy. Nothing unique about that."

"It means he won't stray far from the game herds. They're his supermarket."

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"Maybe he only has to eat once every few months," said Marx, unimpressed.

"No," I said. "That's the third thing we've learned: he's got to eat just about as often as we do."

"How do we know that?" asked Ramona.

"According to Chajinka, he approached the meat very cautiously, but his tracks show that he trotted away once he'd eaten his fill. The trail disappeared after a mile, but we know that he trotted that whole distance."

"Ah!" said Ramona. "I see."

"I sure as hell don't," complained her husband.

"Anything that can sustain that pace, that kind of drain on its energy, has to eat just about every day." I paused. "And we know a fourth thing."

"What is that?" she asked.

"He's not afraid of us," I said. "He had to know we were the ones who killed those meat animals. Our tracks and scent were all over the place, and, of course, there were the ropes. He knows that we're a party of at least nine—five, if you discount Chajinka and the three gunbearers, and he has no reason to discount them. And yet, hours after learning all that, he hasn't left the area." I paused. "That leads to a fifth conclusion. He's not very bright; he didn't understand that Marx's gun was what wounded the animal he killed yesterday—because if he realized we could kill from a distance, he'd *be* afraid of us."

"You deduce all that just from a few tracks and the signs that Chajinka saw?" asked Desmond skeptically.

"Reading signs and interpreting what they mean is what hunting's all about," I explained. "Shooting is just the final step."

"So do we go after him now?" asked Marx eagerly.

I shook my head. "I've already sent Chajinka back out to see if he can find the creature's lair. If he's like most carnivores, he'll want to lie up after he eats. If we know where to look for him, we'll save a lot of time and effort. It makes more sense to wait for Chajinka to report back, and then go after the Snark in the morning."

"It seems so odd," said Ramona. "We've never seen this creature, and yet we've already reasoned out that he's incredibly formidable."

"Of course he's formidable," I said.

"You say that as if *everything* is formidable," she said with a condescending smile.

"That's the first axiom on safari," I replied. "Everything bites."

"If this thing is as dangerous as you make it seem," said Desmond hesitantly, "are we permitted to use more . . . well, sophisticated weapons?"

"Show a little guts, Philemon," said Marx contemptuously.

"I'm a banker, not a goddamned Alan Quatermain!" shot back Desmond.

"If you're afraid, stay in camp," said Marx. "Me, I can't wait to get him in my sights."

"You didn't answer my question, Mr. Bell," persisted Desmond.

Mbele pulled out the Statute Book and began reading aloud. "Unless, in the hunter's judgment, the weapons you are using are inadequate for killing the prey, you must use the weapons that have been approved for the world in question."

"So if he presents a serious threat, we can use pulse guns and molecular imploders and the like?"

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"Have you ever seen a molecular imploder in action?" I asked. "Aim it at a fifty-story building and you turn the whole thing into pudding in about three seconds."

"What about pulse guns?" he persisted.

"There's not a lot of trophy left when one of those babies hits the target," I said.

"We need *something,* damn it!" whined Desmond.

"We have more than enough firepower to bring down any animal on this planet," I said, getting annoyed with him. "I don't mean to be blunt, but there's a difference between an inadequate hunter and an inadequate weapon."

"You can say that again!" muttered Marx.

"That was *very* blunt, Mr. Bell," said Desmond, getting up and walking to his Bubble. His wife stared at him expressionlessly, then pulled out her book and began reading.

"That's what you get for being honest," said Marx, making no attempt to hide his amusement. "I just hope this Snark is half the creature you make it out to be."

I'll settle for half, I thought uneasily.

Chajinka, who was sitting on the hood of the safari vehicle, raised his spear, which was my signal to stop.

He jumped down, bent over, examined the grasses for a few seconds, then trotted off to his left, eyes glued to the ground.

I climbed out and grabbed my rifle.

"You wait here," I said to the four humans. The Dabih gunbearers, who clung to handles and footholds on the back of the vehicle when it was moving, had released their grips and were now standing just behind it.

"Whose shot is it?" asked Marx.

"Let me think," I said. "You shot that big buck yesterday, and Mrs. Desmond killed the boar-like thing with the big tusks just before that. So Mr. Desmond has the first shot today."

"I'm not getting out of the vehicle," said Desmond.

"It's against regulations to shoot from the safety of the vehicle," I pointed out.

"Fuck your regulations and fuck you!" hollered Desmond. "I don't want the first shot! I don't want *any* shot! I don't even know what the hell I'm doing on this stupid safari!"

"Goddammit, Philemon!" hissed Marx fiercely.

"What is it?" asked Desmond, startled.

"If there was anything there, Mr. Desmond," I explained, trying to control my temper, "you just gave it more than ample reason to run hell for leather in the opposite direction. You *never* yell during a hunt."

I walked away in disgust and joined Chajinka beneath a small tree. He was standing beside a young dead herbivore whose skull had been crushed.

"Snark," he said, pointing to the skull.

"When?" I asked.

He pulled back the dead animal's lips to examine its gums, felt the insides of its ears, examined other parts for a few seconds.

"Five hours," he said. "Maybe six."

"The middle of the night."

"Yes."

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"Its habit of getting up late you'll agree
That it carries too far, when I say
That it frequently breakfasts at five-o'clock tea,
And dines on the following day."

"Can you pick up his trail?" I asked Chajinka.

He looked around, then gave the Dabih equivalent of a frown. "It vanishes," he said at last, pointing to a spot ten feet away.

"You mean some animals obliterated his tracks after he made them?"

He shrugged. "No tracks at all. Not his, not anyone's."

"Why not?"

He had no answer.

I stared at the ground for a long moment. "Okay," I said at last. "Let's get back to the vehicle."

He resumed his customary position on the hood, while I sat behind the control panel and thought.

"Well?" asked Marx. "Did it have something to do with the Snark?"

"Yeah," I said, still puzzled by the absence of any tracks. "He made a kill during the night. His prey was an animal built for what I would call evasive maneuvering. That means he's got excellent nocturnal vision and good motor skills."

"So he's a night hunter?" asked Ramona.

"No, I wouldn't say that," I replied. "He killed the crystal-horned buck at midday, so like most predators he's also an opportunist; when a meal is there for the taking, he grabs it. Anyway, if we can't find his lair, we're probably going to have to build a blind, sit motionless with our guns, hang some fresh bait every evening, and hope it interests him."

"That's not *real* hunting!" scoffed Marx.

"There's no way we can go chasing after him in the dark," I responded.

"I'm not chasing *anything* in the dark!" said Desmond adamantly. "You want to do it, you do it without me."

"Don't be such a coward!" said Marx.

"Fuck you, Willard!" Desmond retorted.

"Bold words," said Marx. "Why don't you take some of that bravery and aim it at the animals?"

"I hate it here!" snapped Desmond. "I think we should go back to camp."

"And do what?" asked Marx sarcastically.

"And consider our options," he replied. "It's a big planet. Maybe we could take off and land on one of the other continents—one without any Snarks on it."

"Nonsense!" said Marx. "We came here to hunt big game. Well, now we've found it."

"I don't know *what* we've found," said Desmond, halfway between anger and panic, "and neither do you."

"That's what makes it such good sport and so exciting," said Marx.

"Exciting is watching sports on the holo," Desmond shot back. "*This* is *dangerous*."

"Same damned thing," muttered Marx.

We spent the next two days searching unsuccessfully for any sign of the Snark. For a while I thought he had moved out of the area and considered moving our base camp, but then Chajinka found some relatively fresh

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tracks, perhaps three hours old. So we didn't move the camp after all—but we also didn't find the creature.

Then, on the third afternoon of the search, as we were taking a break, sitting in the shade of a huge tree with purple and gold flowers, we heard a strange sound off in the distance.

"Thunder?" asked Marx.

"Doesn't seem likely," replied Pollard. "There's not a cloud in the sky."

"Well, it's *something*," continued Marx.

Ramona frowned. "And it's getting closer. Well, louder, anyway."

On a hunch, I set my lenses to Telescopic, and it was a damned lucky thing I did.

"*Everybody! Up into the tree—fast!*" I shouted.

"But—"

"No arguments! Get going!"

They weren't the most agile tree-climbers I'd ever encountered, but when they were finally able to see what I had seen, they managed to get clear of the ground in one hell of a hurry. A minute later a few thousand Marx's Gazelles thundered past.

I waited for the dust to settle, then lowered myself to the ground and scanned the horizon.

"Okay, it's safe to come down now," I announced.

"Why didn't we climb into the vehicle?" asked Ramona, getting out of the tree and checking her hands for cuts.

"It's an open vehicle, Mrs. Desmond," I pointed out. "You could have wound up with a fractured skull as they jumped over it—or with a gazelle in your lap if one of them was a poor jumper."

"Point taken."

"What the hell would cause something like that?" asked Pollard, staring after the stampeding herd as he brushed himself off.

"I'd say a predator made a sloppy kill, or maybe blew one entirely."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because this is the first time we've seen a stampede . . . so we can assume that when they're killed quickly and efficiently, the gazelles just move out of the predator's range and then go back to grazing. It's when the predator misses his prey, or wounds it, and then races after it into the middle of the herd that they panic."

"You think it's one of the big cats?" asked Pollard.

"It's possible."

"I'd love to get some holos of those cats on a kill."

"You may get your wish, Mr. Pollard," I said. "We'll backtrack to where the stampede started and hope we get lucky."

"That suits me just fine," said Marx, patting his rifle.

We headed southwest in the vehicle until the terrain became too rough, then left it behind and started walking as the landscape changed from hilly and tree-covered to heavily forested. Chajinka trotted ahead of us, eyes on the ground, spotting things even I couldn't see, and finally he came to a stop.

"What is it?" I asked, catching up with him.

He pointed straight ahead into the dense foliage. "He is there."

"He?"

"The Snark," he said, pointing to a single track.

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"How deep is the cover?" I asked. "How do you know he didn't run right through it?"

He pointed to the bushes, which were covered with thorns. "He cannot run through this without pain."

"You've never seen him," said Ramona, joining us. "How do you know?"

"If it did not rip his flesh, he would be a forest creature, created by God to live here," answered Chajinka, as if explaining it to a child. "But we know that he hunts plains game. A forest dweller with thick, heavy skin and bones could not move swiftly enough. So this is not his home—it is his hiding place."

I thought there was a good chance that it was more than his hiding place, that it could very well be his fortress. It was damned near impenetrable, and the forest floor was covered with dry leaves, so no one was going to sneak up on him without giving him plenty of warning.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Marx, approaching with Desmond. He stopped long enough to take his rifle from his gunbearer.

"We're waiting until I can figure out the best way to go about it," I responded.

"We walk in and blow him away," said Marx. "What's so hard about that?"

I shook my head. "This is *his* terrain. He knows every inch of it. You're going to make a lot of noise walking in there, and the way the upper terraces of the trees are intertwined, I've got a feeling that it could be dark as night six hundred yards into the forest."

"So we'll use infra-red scopes on our guns," said Marx.

I kept staring at the thick foliage. "I don't like it," I said. "He's got every advantage."

"But *we've* got the weapons," persisted Marx.

"With minimal visibility and maneuverability, they won't do you much good."

"Bullshit!" spat Marx. "We're wasting time. Let's go in after him."

"The four of you are my responsibility," I replied. "I can't risk your safety by letting you go in there. Within a couple of minutes you could be out of touch with me and with each other. You'll be making noise with every step you take, and if I'm right about the light, before long you could be standing right next to him without seeing him. And we haven't explored any Dodgson forests yet—he might not be the only danger. There could be everything from arboreal killer cats to poisonous insects to fifty-foot-long snakes with an attitude."

"So what do you propose?" asked Marx.

"A blind makes the most sense," I said. "But it could take half a day to build one, and who the hell knows where he'll be by then?" I paused. "All right. The three of you with weapons will spread out. Mr. Pollard, stand well behind them. Chajinka and I will go into the bush and try to flush him out."

"I thought you said it was too dangerous," said Ramona.

"Let me amend that," I answered. "It's too dangerous for amateurs."

"If there's a chance that he can harm you, why don't we just forget about it?" she continued.

"I appreciate your concern," I began, "but—"

"I'm not being totally altruistic. What happens to us if he kills you?"

"You'll return to base camp and tell Mbele what happened. He'll radio a

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subspace message to headquarters, and Silinger & Mahr will decide whether to give you a refund or take you to another planet with a new hunter."

"You make it sound so . . . so businesslike," she said distastefully.

"It's my business," I replied.

"Why did you ever become a hunter?"

I shrugged. "Why did you become a judge?"

"I have a passion for order," she said.

"So do I," I replied.

"You find order in killing things?"

"I find order in Nature. Death is just a part of it." I paused. "Now, Mr. Marx," I said, turning back to him, "I want you to . . ."

He wasn't there.

"Where the hell did he go?" I demanded.

No one seemed to know, not even Chajinka. Then his gunbearer approached me.

"Boss Marx went *there*." He pointed to the forest, then ruefully held up the back-up rifle. "He did not wait for me."

"*Shit!*" I muttered. "It's bad enough that I've got to go in after the Snark! Now I stand a hell of a good chance of getting blown away by that macho bastard!"

"Why would he shoot you?" asked Ramona.

"He'll hear me before he sees me," I answered. "He's running on adrenaline. He'll be sure I'm the Snark."

"Then stay out here."

"I wish I could," I said truthfully. "But it's my job to protect him whether he wants me to or not."

That particular argument became academic about five seconds later, when we heard a shot, and then a long, agonized scream.

A *human* scream.

"You two stand about two hundred yards apart," I said to the Desmonds. "Shoot anything that comes out of there that doesn't look like me or a Dabih!" Then, to Chajinka: "Let's go!"

The Dabih led the way into the forest. Then, as it started getting thicker and darker, we lost Marx's trail. "We're more likely to find him if we split up," I whispered. "You go left, I'll go right."

I kept my gun at the ready, wishing I'd inserted my infra-red lenses into my eyes that morning. After a minute I couldn't hear Chajinka any more, which meant when I finally heard footsteps I was going to have to hold my fire until I could tell whether it was the Dabih or the Snark.

It's no secret that hunters hate going into the bush after a wounded animal. Well, let me tell you something: going into the bush after an *un*wounded animal is even less appealing. Sweat ran down into my eyes, insects crawled inside my shoes and socks and up my shirtsleeves, and my gun seemed to have tripled in weight. I could barely see ten feet in front of me, and if Marx had yelled for help from fifty yards away, I probably would be five minutes locating him.

But Marx was past yelling for help. I was suddenly able to make out the figure of a man lying on the ground. I approached him cautiously, seeing Snarks—whatever they looked like—behind every tree.

Finally I reached him and knelt down to examine him. His throat had been slashed open, and his innards were pouring out of a gaping hole in his

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belly. He was probably dead before he hit the ground. "*Chajinka!*" I hollered. There was no response.

I called his name every thirty seconds, and finally, after about five minutes, I heard a body shuffling through the thick bush, its translated, monotone voice saying, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

"Get over here!" I said.

He joined me a moment later. "Snark," he said, looking at Marx's corpse.

"For sure?" I asked.

"For sure."

"All right," I said. "Help me carry his body back out of here."

Then, suddenly, we heard two rifle shots.

"Damn!" I bellowed. "He's broken out!"

"Perhaps he will be dead," said Chajinka, leading the way back out of the forest. "There were two shots."

When we finally got into the open, we found Philemon Desmond sitting on the ground, hyperventilating, his whole body shaking. Ramona and Pollard stood a few yards away, staring at him—she with open contempt, he with a certain degree of sympathy.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"He burst out of the woods and came right at me!" said Desmond in a shaky voice.

"We heard two shots. Did you hit him?"

"I don't think so." He began shaking all over. "No, I definitely didn't."

"How the hell could you miss?" I shouted. "He couldn't have been twenty yards away!"

"I've never killed anything before!" Desmond yelled back.

I scanned the hilly countryside. There was no sign of the Snark, and there had to be a good five hundred hiding places just within my field of vision.

"Wonderful!" I muttered. "Just wonderful!"

The Bellman looked uffish, and wrinkled his brow.
"If only you'd spoken before!
It's excessively awkward to mention it now,
With the Snark, so to speak, at the door!"

We dragged Marx's body out of the forest and loaded it into the back of the safari vehicle.

"My God!" whined Desmond. "He's dead! He was the only one of us who knew the first damned thing about hunting, and he's dead! We've got to get out of here!"

"He was also a friend," said Ramona. "You might spare a little of your self-pity for *him*."

"Ramona!" said Pollard harshly.

"I'm sorry," she said with a total lack of sincerity.

Pollard had been staring at Marx's body since we brought it out of the forest. "Jesus, he's a mess!" he said at last. "Did he suffer much?"

"No," I assured him. "Not with wounds like those—he would have gone into shock immediately."

"Well, we can be thankful for that, I suppose," said Pollard. He finally tore his eyes away from the body and turned to me. "What now?"

"Now it's not a matter of sport any more," I said, morbidly wondering

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whether the authorities would revoke my license for losing a client, or simply suspend it. "He's killed one of us. He's got to die."

"I thought that was the whole purpose of the safari."

"The purpose was a sporting stalk, with the odds all on the game's side. Now the purpose is to kill him as quickly and efficiently as we can."

"That sounds like revenge," noted Ramona.

"Practicality," I corrected her. "Now that he knows how easy it is to kill an armed man, we don't want him to get into the habit."

"How do you stop him?"

"There are ways," I said. "I'll use every trick I know—and I know a lifetime's worth of them—before he has a chance to kill again." I paused. "Now, so I'll know which traps to set, I want you to tell me what he actually looks like."

"Like a huge red ape with big glaring eyes," said Pollard.

"No," said Ramona. "He looked more like a brown bear, but with longer legs."

"He was sleek," offered Pollard.

Ramona disagreed again. "No, he was shaggy."

"Wonderful," I muttered. "I trust you at least took a couple of holos, Mr. Pollard?"

He shook his head. "I was so surprised when he burst out of there that I totally forgot the camera," he admitted shamefacedly.

"Well, that's an enormous help," I said disgustedly. I turned to Desmond. "How about you?"

"I don't know," he whimpered. Suddenly he shuddered. "He looked like Death!"

"You must forgive Philemon," said Ramona, with an expression that said *she* wasn't about to forgive him. "He's really very good at investments and mergers and even hostile takeovers. He's just not very competent at *physical* things." She patted his medal. "Except running."

Marx had a wife and three grown children back on Roosevelt III, and his friends felt sure they'd want him shipped home, so we put his body in a vacuum container and stuck it in the cargo hold.

After that was done, Chajinka and I went to work. We set seven traps, then went back to camp and waited.

Early the next morning we went out to see what we'd accomplished.

That was when I learned that the Snark had a sardonic sense of humor.

Each of the traps contained a dead animal. But lest we mistakenly think that *we* had anything to do with it, each one had its head staved in.

The son of a bitch was actually mocking us.

"For the Snark's a peculiar creature, that won't
Be caught in a commonplace way.
Do all that you know, and try all that you don't:
Not a chance must be wasted today!"

I awoke the next morning to the sound of vaguely familiar alien jabbering. It took me a minute to clear my head and identify what I was hearing. Then I raced out of my Bubble and almost bumped into Chajinka, who was running to meet me.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

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He responded in his native tongue.

"Where's your t-pack?" I asked.

He jabbered at me. I couldn't understand a word of it.

Finally he pulled me over to the area where the Dabihs ate and slept, and pointed to the shapeless pile of metal and plastic and computer chips. Sometime during the night the Snark had silently entered the camp and destroyed all the t-packs.

I kept wondering: was he just lucky in his choice, or could he possibly have *known* how much we needed them?

Mbele, awakened by the same sounds, quickly emerged from his Bubble.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked.

"See for yourself," I said.

"Jesus!" he said. "Can any of the Dabihs speak Terran?"

I shook my head. "If they could, they wouldn't need t-packs, would they?"

"Was it the Snark?"

I grimaced. "Who else?"

"So what do you do now?"

"First, I try to figure out whether it was mischief or malice, and whether he had any idea what havoc it would cause."

"You think he might be a little smarter than your average bear in the woods?"

"I don't know. He lives like an animal, he acts like an animal, and he hunts like an animal. But in a short space of time he's killed Marx, and he's seen to it that the five remaining Men can't communicate with the twelve Dabihs." I forced a wry smile to my mouth. "That's not bad for a dumb animal, is it?"

"You'd better wake the others and let them know what's happened," said Mbele.

"I know," I said. I kicked one of the broken t-packs up against a tree. "Shit!"

I woke the Desmonds and Pollard and told them what had occurred. I thought Philemon Desmond might faint. The others were a little more useful.

"How long ago did this happen?" asked Pollard.

"Chajinka could probably give you a more accurate estimate, but I can't speak to him. My best guess is about two hours."

"So if we go after him, he's two hours ahead of us?"

"That's right."

"We'd better kill him quickly," said Ramona. "He could come back any time, now that he knows where our camp is."

"Give me a laser rifle," added Pollard. "I haven't fired a gun since I was a kid at camp, but how the hell hard can it be to sweep the area with a beam?"

"You look a little under the weather, Mr. Desmond," I said. "Perhaps you'd like to stay in camp."

Actually, he looked incredibly grateful for the out I'd given him. Then his wife ruined it all by adding that he'd just be in the way.

"I'm going," he said.

"It's really not necessary," I said.

"I paid. I'm going."

And that was that.

"There's no sense taking gunbearers," I said as the four of us walked to the safari vehicle. "We can't talk to them, and besides, the rules don't apply in this case. If we see him, we'll take him from the safety of the vehicle, and

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it'll give you something solid to rest your rifles on while you're sweeping the area." They climbed onto their seats. "Wait here a minute."

I went back, found Mbele, and told him that we were going after the Snark, and that he should use the Dabihs to set up some kind of defensive perimeter. Then I signaled to Chajinka to join me. A moment later he had taken his customary position on the hood of the vehicle, and we were off in pursuit of the Snark.

The trail led due northeast, past the savannah, toward rolling country and a large, lightly forested valley. Two or three times I thought we'd spot him just over the next hill, but he was a cagey bastard, and by midafternoon we still hadn't sighted him.

As dusk fell Chajinka couldn't read the signs from the vehicle, so he jumped off and began trotting along, eyes glued to the ground. When we entered the valley, he was following the trail so slowly that Ramona and Pollard got out and walked along with him while I followed in the vehicle and Desmond stayed huddled in the back of it.

But the valley grew narrow and narrower still,
And the evening got darker and colder,
Till (merely from nervousness, not from good will)
They marched along shoulder to shoulder.

Night fell with no sign of the Snark. I didn't want to chance damaging the vehicle by driving over that terrain in the dark, so we slept until sunrise, and then drove back to base camp, reaching it just before noon.

Nobody was prepared for the sight that awaited us.

The eleven Dabihs we'd left behind were sprawled dead on the ground in grotesquely contorted positions, each with his throat shredded or his intestines ripped out. Dismembered arms and legs were everywhere, and the place was swimming in blood. Dead staring eyes greeted us accusingly, as if to say: "Where were you when we needed you?"

The stench was worse than the sight. Ramona gagged and began vomiting. Desmond whimpered and curled up into a fetal ball on the floor of the vehicle so he wouldn't have to look at the carnage. Pollard froze like a statue; then, after a moment, he too began vomiting.

I'd seen a lot of death in my time. So had Chajinka. But neither of us had ever seen anything remotely like this. There hadn't been much of a struggle. It doesn't take a four-hundred-pound predator very long to wipe out a bunch of unarmed ninety-pound Dabihs. My guess was that it was over in less than a minute.

"What the hell happened here?" asked Pollard, gesturing weakly toward all the blood-soaked dismembered bodies when he finally was able to speak.

"The method employed I would gladly explain,
While I have it so clear in my head.
If I had but the time and you had but the brain—
But much yet remains to be said."

"Where's Mbele?" I asked, finally getting past the shock of what I was looking at and realizing that he wasn't among them.

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Before anyone could answer, I raced to the hatch and entered the ship, rifle at the ready, half-expecting to be pounced on by the Snark at any moment.

I found what was left of Captain Mbele in the control room. His head had been torn from his body, and his stomach was ripped open. The floor, the bulkheads, even the viewscreen were all drenched with his blood.

"Is he there?" called Ramona from the ground.

"Stay out!" I yelled.

Then I searched every inch of the ship, looking for the Snark. I could feel my heart pounding as I explored each section, but there was no sign of him.

I went back to the control room and began checking it over thoroughly. The Snark didn't know what made the ship work, or even what it was, but he knew it belonged to his enemies, and he did a lot of damage. Some of it—to the pilot's chair and the DeepSleep pods and the auxiliary screens—didn't matter. Some of it—to the fusion ignition and the navigational computer and the subspace radio—mattered a *lot*.

I continued going through the ship, assessing the damage. He'd ripped up a couple of beds in his fury, but the most serious destruction was to the galley. I had a feeling that nothing in it would ever work again.

I went back outside and confronted the party.

"Did you find Captain Mbele?" asked Ramona.

"Yes. He's in the ship." She started walking to the hatch. I grabbed her arm. "Trust me: you don't want to see him."

"That's it!" screamed Desmond. "We were crazy to come here! I want out! Not tomorrow, not later! *Now!*"

"I second the motion," agreed Ramona. "Let's get the hell off this planet before it kills any more of us."

"That's not possible," I said grimly. "The Snark did some serious damage to the ship."

"How long will it take to fix it?" asked Pollard.

"If I was a skilled spacecraft mechanic with a full set of tools and all the replacement parts I needed, maybe a week," I answered. "But I'm a hunter who doesn't know how to fix a broken spaceship. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"You mean we're stranded?" asked Ramona.

"For the time being," I said.

"What do you mean, 'for the time being'?" shrieked Desmond hysterically. "We're here forever! We're dead! We're all dead!"

I grabbed him and shook him, and when he wouldn't stop screaming I slapped him, hard, on the face.

"That won't help!" I said angrily.

"We'll never get off this goddamned dirtball!" he bleated.

"Yes we will," I said. "Mbele had to check in with Silinger & Mahr every week. When they don't hear from us, they'll send a rescue party. All we have to do is stay alive until they get here."

"They'll never come!" moaned Desmond. "We're all going to die!"

"Stop your whining!" I snapped. *This is just what I needed now,* I thought disgustedly; *we're surrounded by dismembered corpses, the very ground is soaked with blood, the Snark's probably still nearby, and this asshole is losing it.* "We have work to do!" They all looked at me. "I want the three of you to start digging a mass grave for the eleven Dabihs. When that's done, I want us to burn everything—every tree, every bush, everything—to get rid

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of the smell of blood so it doesn't attract any predators. What we can't burn, we'll bury."

"And what are *you* going to be doing?" demanded Desmond, who had at least regained some shred of composure.

"I'm going to bring what's left of Mbele out of the ship and clean up all the blood," I said bluntly. "Unless you'd rather do it." I thought he was going to faint. "Then, if I can make myself understood to Chajinka, he and I will try to secure the area."

"How?" asked Ramona.

"We've got some devices that are sensitive to movement and body heat. Maybe we can rig up some kind of alarm system. Chajinka and I can hide them around the perimeter of the camp. If we finish before you do, we'll pitch in and help with the grave. Now get busy—the sooner we finish, the sooner we can lock ourselves in the ship and decide on our next move."

"*Is* there a next move?" asked Pollard.

"Always," I replied.

It took me almost four hours to clean Mbele's blood and innards from the control room. I put what was left of him into a vacuum pouch, then hefted it to my shoulder and carried it outside.

I found Chajinka helping with the grave. I called him over and showed him, with an elaborate pantomime, what I had in mind, and a few moments later we were planting the sensing devices around the perimeter of our camp. I saw no reason to stay in the Bubbles with such a dangerous enemy on the loose, so I collapsed them and moved them back into the cargo hold. The grave still wasn't done, so Chajinka and I helped finish the job. Desmond wouldn't touch any of the corpses, and Ramona looked like she was going to get sick again, so the Dabih, Pollard, and I dragged the corpses and spare body parts to the grave, I added the pouch containing Mbele's remains, and after we four humans and Chajinka filled it in, I read the Bible over it.

"Now what?" asked Ramona, dirty and on the verge of physical collapse.

"Now we burn everything, bury any remaining dried blood, and then we move into the ship," I said.

"And just wait to be rescued?"

I shook my head. "It could be weeks, even a month, before a rescue party arrives. We're going to need meat, and since we've no way to refrigerate it with the galley destroyed, it means we'll probably have to go hunting every day, or at least every other day."

"I see," she said.

"And I'm going to kill the Snark," I said.

"Why don't we just wait for the rescue party and not take any chances?" suggested Ramona fearfully.

"It's killed thirteen beings who were under my protection," I said grimly. "I'm going to kill him if it's the last thing I do."

"Maybe Philemon should give you his laser rifle," Ramona suggested. "He's not very good with it anyway."

Desmond glared at her, but made no reply.

"He may need it," I said. "Besides, I'm happy with my own weapon."

"Where will you hunt for it?" asked Pollard.

"Right in this general area," I answered. "He has no reason to leave it."

"We can't just sit around like bait and wait for him!" whined Desmond. "In all the time we've been on the planet you've never even seen him—but

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he's killed Marx and Mbele and our Dabihs. He comes into camp whenever he wants! He sabotages our t-packs and our ship! We'll need an army to kill him!"

"If he comes back, you'll be safe inside the ship," I said.

"Locking himself in the ship didn't help Captain Mbele," noted Ramona.

"He didn't close the hatch. As I read the signs, he saw what was happening and raced into the ship for a gun. The Snark caught him before he found it." I paused. "He knew better than to be out here without a weapon."

"So now it's *his* fault that this monster killed him?" shouted Desmond. "Let's not blame the hunter who fucked up! Let's blame the victim!"

That's when I lost it. "One more word out of you and there'll be another killing!" I shouted back at him.

Pollard stepped between us. "Stop it!" he snapped. "The creature's out there! Don't do his work for him!"

We both calmed down after that, and finally went into the ship. There was no food, but everyone was so physically and emotionally exhausted that it didn't matter. Half an hour later we were all sound asleep.

Each morning Chajinka and I walked across the scorched, empty field that had so recently been covered with vegetation. We would climb into the safari vehicle and prepare to go out to bag the day's food—and even though there was no longer any place to hide near the ship, I constantly had the uneasy feeling that *he* was watching us, measuring our strength, biding his time.

We never went more than four miles from camp. I didn't shoot the choicest animals, just the closest. Then we'd cut off the strips of meat we thought we'd need and leave the carcass for the scavengers. We'd return to camp, and after breakfast we'd set out on foot to look for signs of the Snark.

I knew he was nearby, knew it as surely as I knew my own name, but we couldn't find any physical sign of him. I warned the others not to leave the ship without their weapons, preferably not to leave it at all, and under no circumstances were they to go more than thirty yards away from it unless *they were in my company.*

By the fifth day after the massacre, everyone was getting tired of red meat, so I decided to take Chajinka down to the river and see if we could spear a few fish.

"Can I come with you?" asked Ramona, appearing just inside the hatch. "I'm starting to feel distinctly claustrophobic."

I couldn't see any reason why not. Hell, she was safer with Chajinka and me than back at the ship.

"Bring your rifle," I said.

She disappeared inside the ship, then emerged with a laser rifle a moment later.

"I'm ready."

"Let's go," I said.

We marched through heavy bush to the river.

"All the local animals must come down here to drink," noted Ramona. "Wouldn't it be easier to do your hunting right here rather than go out in the safari vehicle each morning?"

"We'd attract too many scavengers," I explained. "And since Chajinka and I come down here twice a day to bring water back to the ship, why cause ourselves any problems?"

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"I see." She paused. "Are there any carnivores in the river—the kind that might eat a human?"

"I haven't seen any," I replied. "But I sure as hell wouldn't recommend taking a swim."

When we reached the river, Chajinka grabbed a large branch and beat the water. When he was sure it was safe, he waded out, thigh-deep, and held his spear above his head, poised to strike, while we watched him in total silence. He stayed motionless for almost two full minutes, then suddenly stabbed the water and came away with a large, wriggling fish.

He grinned and said something that I couldn't understand, then clambered onto the bank, picked up a rock, and smashed it down on the fish's head. It stopped moving, and he went back into the water.

"Two more and we'll have our dinner," I remarked.

"He's really something," she said. "Where did you find him?"

"I inherited him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He was the tracker for the hunter I apprenticed under," I explained. "When he retired, he left me his client list—and Chajinka."

Suddenly there was a yell of triumph from Chajinka. He held up his spear, and there was a huge fish, maybe twenty-five pounds, squirming at the end of it. The Dabih himself didn't weigh much more than eighty-five pounds, the current was strong and the footing was slippery. Suddenly he fell over backward and vanished beneath the surface of the water.

He emerged again a second later, but without the spear and the fish. I saw them floating downstream a good ten yards from him. There was no sense telling him where to look; he couldn't understand a word I said without a t-pack. So I waded into the water and went after the spear myself. It became chest-deep very quickly, and I had to fight the current, but I finally reached the spear and waded back to shore. Chajinka climbed out a moment later with an embarrassed grin on his face. He made another incomprehensible comment, then brained the fish as he had done with the first one.

"See?" I said sardonically. "Even fishing can be exciting when you're on safari."

There was no answer. I spun around. Ramona Desmond was nowhere to be seen.

So the Snark pronounced sentence, the Judge being quite
Too nervous to utter a word.
When it rose to its feet, there was silence like night,
And the fall of a pin might be heard.

I squatted down next to her corpse. There was no blood; he'd noiselessly broken her neck and left her where she'd fallen.

"He was watching us the whole time," I said furiously. "He waited until she was alone, then grabbed her and pulled her into the bush." A chilling thought occurred to me. "I wonder who's hunting whom?"

Chajinka muttered something incomprehensible.

"All right," I said at last. "Let's take her back to camp."

I lifted Ramona's body to my shoulder and signaled him to follow me.

Desmond raced out of the ship when he saw us. He began flagellating

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himself and pulling tufts of his hair out, screaming nonsense words at the top of his lungs.

"What the hell is happening?" asked Pollard, clambering out through the hatch. Then he saw the body. He had to work to keep his voice under control. "Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus!" he kept repeating. When he'd finally calmed down, he said, "It's more than an animal! It's like some vengeful alien god come to life!"

Chajinka went into the cargo hold and emerged with a shovel.

Pollard stared at Desmond, who was still raving. "I'll help with the grave."

"Thanks," I said. "I think I'd better get Desmond to his cabin and give him a sedative."

I walked over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"It was *your* fault!" he screamed. "*You* were supposed to protect her and you let it kill her!"

I couldn't deny it, so I just kept urging him gently toward the ship.

And then, between one second and the next, he snapped. I could see it in his face. His eyes went wide, the muscles in his jaw began twitching, even the tenor of his voice changed.

"That thing is going to learn what it means to kill the wife of the most powerful man on Far London!" He looked off into the bush and hollered: "I'm Philemon Desmond, goddammit, and I'm through being terrified by some ignorant fucking beast! Do you hear me? It's over! You're dead meat!"

"Come on, Mr. Desmond," I said softly, pushing him toward the ship.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, and I could tell that he really didn't recognize me.

I was about to humor him with an answer when everything went black and the ground came up to meet me.

And the Banker, inspired with a courage so new
It was a matter for general remark,
Rushed madly ahead and was lost to their view
In his zeal to discover the Snark.

Pollard sloshed some water on my face. I gasped for breath, then sat up and put a hand to my head. It came away covered with blood.

"Are you all right?" he asked, kneeling down next to me, and I saw that Chajinka was behind him.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "We were just starting to dig the grave when I heard Desmond suddenly stop gibbering. Then he whacked you on the head with something, and ran off."

"I never saw it coming," I groaned, blinking my eyes furiously. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know." He pointed to the southwest. "That way, I think."

"*Shit!*" I said. "The Snark is still in the area!"

I tried to get to my feet, but was overwhelmed by pain and dizziness, and sat back down, hard.

"Take it easy," he said. "You've probably got a hell of a concussion. Where's the first aid kit? Maybe I can at least stop the bleeding."

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I told him where to find it, then concentrated on trying to focus my eyes.

When Pollard returned and began working on my head, I asked, "Did you see if he at least took his laser rifle with him?"

"If he didn't have it when he hit you, he didn't stop to get it."

"Goddammit!"

"I guess that means he doesn't have it."

"Wonderful," I muttered, wincing as he did something to the back of my head. "So he's unarmed, running through the bush, and screaming at the top of his lungs."

"All done," said Pollard, standing up. "It's not a pretty job, but at least the bleeding's stopped. How do you feel?"

"Groggy," I said. "Help me up."

Once I was on my feet, I looked around. "Where's my rifle?"

"Right here," said Pollard, picking it up and handing it to me. "But you're in no shape to go after Desmond."

"I'm not going after Desmond," I mumbled. "I'm going after *him!*" I signaled Chajinka to join me and set off unsteadily to the southwest. "Lock yourself in the ship."

"I'll finish burying Ramona first."

"*Don't!*"

"But—"

"Unless you're prepared to fend him off with a shovel if he shows up, do what I said."

"I can't leave her body out for the scavengers," Pollard protested.

"Take her with you. Spray her with the preservatives we use for trophies and stash her in the cargo hold. We'll bury her when I get back."

"*If* you get back," he corrected me. "You look like you can barely stand on your feet."

"I'll be back," I promised him. "I'm still a hunter, and he's still just an animal."

"Yeah—he's just an animal. That's why there's just you, me and Chajinka left alive."

Desmond didn't get very far—not that I ever expected him to. We found him half a mile away, his skull crushed. I carried him back to camp and buried him next to his wife.

"That bastard's been one step ahead of us from the start," said Pollard bitterly as we sat down next to the ship and slaked our thirst with some lukewarm water. Chajinka sat a few yards away, motionless as a statue, watching and listening for any sign of the Snark.

"He's smarter than I thought," I admitted. "Or luckier."

"Nothing is that lucky," said Pollard. "He must be intelligent."

"Absolutely," I agreed.

Pollard's eyes went wide. "Wait a minute!" he said sharply. "If you *knew* he was intelligent, what the hell were we doing hunting him in the first place?"

"There's a difference between intelligence and sentience," I said. "We know he's intelligent. We don't know that he's sentient."

He looked puzzled. "I thought they were the same thing."

I shook my head. "Back on Earth, chimpanzees were intelligent enough to create crude tools, and to pass that knowledge on from one generation to the next—but no one ever claimed they were sentient. The fact that the

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Snark can hide his trail, spot my traps and elude us makes him intelligent. It doesn't make him sentient."

"On the other hand, it doesn't prove he's *not* sentient," said Pollard stubbornly.

"No, it doesn't."

"So what do we do?"

"We kill him," I answered.

"Even if he's sentient?"

"What do you do when someone murders fifteen sentient beings?" I said. "If he's a Man, you execute him. If he's an animal, you track him down and kill him. Either way, the result is the same."

"All right," said Pollard dubiously. "We kill him. How?"

"We leave the ship and go after him."

"Why?" he demanded. "We're safe in the ship!"

"Tell that to Mbele and the Desmonds and the Dabihs," I shot back. "As long as we stay here, he knows where we are and we don't know where *he* is. That means he's the hunter and we're the prey. If we leave camp and pick up his trail before he picks up ours, we go back to being the hunters again."

I got to my feet. "In fact, the sooner we start, the better."

He wasn't happy about it, but he had no choice but to come along, since the alternative was to remain behind alone. After we loaded the vehicle I patted the hood, waited for Chajinka to jump onto it, and then we drove to the spot where we'd found Desmond's body.

The Dabih picked up the trail, and we began tracking the Snark. I wanted him so bad I could taste it. It wasn't just revenge for all the Men and Dabihs he'd killed. It wasn't even a matter of professional pride. It was because I knew this was my last hunt, that I'd never get my license back after losing fifteen sentient beings who were under my protection.

The trail led back to the camp, where the Snark had watched us bury Desmond's body. It had kept out of sight until we drove off, and then began moving in a northwesterly direction. We tracked it until late afternoon, when we found ourselves about eight miles from the ship.

"There's no sense going back for the night," I told Pollard. "We might never pick up the trail again."

"Isn't he likely to double back to the camp?"

"Not while we're out here, he isn't," I said with absolute certainty. "This isn't a hunt any longer—it's a war. Neither of us will quit until the other's dead."

He looked at me much the way I'd looked at Desmond earlier in the day. Finally he spoke up: "We can't track him at night."

"I know," I replied. "We'll each keep watch for three hours—you, me, and Chajinka—and we'll start again as soon as it's light enough."

I sat the first watch, and I was so keyed up that I couldn't get to sleep, so I sat through Pollard's watch as well before I woke Chajinka and managed a three-hour nap. As soon as it was light, we started following the trail again.

By noon we were approaching a small canyon. Then, suddenly, I saw a flicker of motion off in the distance. I stopped the vehicle and activated my Telescopic lenses.

He was more than a mile away, and he had his back to us, but I knew I'd finally gotten my first look at the Snark.

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Erect and sublime, for one moment of time,
In the next, that wild figure they saw
(As if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm,
While they waited and listened in awe.

I drove to the edge of the canyon. Chajinka hopped off the hood, and Pollard and I joined him a moment later.

"You're sure you saw him?" asked Pollard.

"I'm sure," I said. "Bipedal. Rust-colored. Looks almost like a cross between a bear and a gorilla, at least from this distance."

"Yeah, that's him all right." He peered down into the canyon. "And he climbed down there?"

"That's right," I said.

"I assume we're going after him?"

"There's no reason to believe he'll come out anywhere near here," I said. "If we wait, we'll lose him."

"It looks pretty rocky," he said. "Can we pick up his trail?"

"Chajinka will find it."

Pollard sighed deeply. "What the hell," he said with a shrug. "I'm not going to wait here alone while the two of you go after him. I figure I'll be safer with you—providing I don't break my neck on the terrain."

I motioned for Chajinka to lead the way down, since he was far more sure-footed than any human. He walked along the edge of the precipice for perhaps fifty yards, then came to a crude path we were able to follow for the better part of an hour. Then we were on the canyon floor next to a narrow stream where we slaked our thirst, hoping the water wouldn't make us too sick, as we'd left the irradiation gear back at the ship.

We rested briefly, then took up the hunt again. Chajinka was able to find a trail where I would have sworn none existed. By early afternoon, the floor of the canyon was no longer flat, and we had to follow a winding path over and around a series of rock formations. Pollard was game, but he was out of shape. He kept falling behind, actually dropping out of sight a couple of times, which forced us to stop and wait for him to catch up.

When he dropped behind yet again, I wanted to ask him if he needed a break. I didn't dare shout and give away our position to the Snark, so I compromised by signaling Chajinka to slow his pace until Pollard caught up with us.

He didn't—and after a few minutes we went back to see what was the matter.

I couldn't find him. It was like he had vanished off the face of the planet.

They hunted till darkness came on, but they found
Not a button, or feather, or mark,
By which they could tell that they stood on the ground
Where the Baker had met with the Snark.

We spent half an hour looking for Pollard. There was no trace of him, and eventually we were forced to admit that somehow the Snark had turned back on his trail and circled around us or hid and waited for us to pass by. Either way, it was obvious that he'd managed to get Pollard.

I knew it was futile to keep looking for him, so I signaled Chajinka to con-

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tinue searching for the Snark. We hiked over the rocky canyon floor until at last we came to a steep wall.

"We go up, or we go back," I said, looking at the wall. "Which will it be?"

He stared at me expectantly, waiting for me to signal him which way to go.

I looked back the way we'd come, then up in the direction of the path we were following—

—and as I looked up, I saw a large object hurtling down toward me!

I pushed Chajinka out of the way and threw myself to my left, rolling as I hit the ground. The object landed five feet away with a bone-jarring *thud!*—and I saw that it was Pollard's body.

I looked up, and there was the Snark standing on a ledge, glaring down at me. Our eyes met, and then he turned and began racing up the canyon wall.

"Are you all right?" I asked Chajinka, who was just getting to his feet.

He brushed himself off, then made a digging motion and looked questioningly at me.

We didn't have any shovels, and it would take hours to dig even a shallow grave in the rocky ground using our hands. If we left Pollard's body where it was, it would be eaten by scavengers—but if we took the time to bury him, we'd lose the Snark.

"Leave him here to his fate—it is getting so late!"
The Bellman exclaimed in a fright.
"We have lost half the day. Any further delay,
And we sha'n't catch a Snark before night."

When we got halfway up the wall, I stopped and looked back. Alien raptors were circling high in the sky. Then the first of them landed next to Pollard and began pulling away bits of his flesh. I turned away and concentrated on the Snark.

It took an hour to reach the top, and then Chajinka spent a few minutes picking up the Snark's trail again. We followed it for another hour, and the landscape slowly changed, gradually becoming lush and green.

And then something strange happened. The trail suddenly became easy to follow.

Almost *too* easy.

We tracked him for another half hour. I sensed that he was near, and I was ready to fire at anything that moved. The humidity made my hands sweat so much that I didn't trust them not to slip on the stock and barrel, so I signaled Chajinka that I wanted to take a brief break.

I took a sip from my canteen. Then, as I leaned against a tree, wiping the moisture from my rifle, I saw a movement half a mile away.

It was *him!*

I pulled my rifle to my shoulder and took aim—but we were too far away. I leaped to my feet and began running after him. He turned, faced me for just an instant, and vanished into the bush.

When we got to where he'd been, we found that his trail led due north, and we began following it. At one point we stopped so I could remove a stinging insect from inside my boot—and suddenly I caught sight of him again. He roared and disappeared again into the heavy foliage as I raced after him.

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It was almost as if the son of a bitch was *taunting* us, and I wondered: is he leading us into a trap?

And then I had a sudden flash of insight.

Rather than leading us *into* a trap, was he leading us *away* from something?

It didn't make much sense, but somewhere deep in my gut it felt right.

"Stop!" I ordered Chajinka.

He didn't know the word, but the tone of my voice brought him up short.

I pointed to the south. "This way," I said.

The Dabih frowned and pointed toward the Snark, saying something in his own tongue.

"I know he's there," I said. "But come this way anyway."

I began walking south. I had taken no more than four or five steps when Chajinka was at my side, jabbering again, and pulling my arm, trying to make me follow the Snark.

"No!" I said harshly. It certainly wasn't the word, so it must have been the tone. Whatever the reason, he shrugged, looked at me as if I was crazy, and fell into step behind me. He couldn't very well lead, since there was no trail and he didn't know where we were going. Neither did I, for that matter, but my every instinct said the Snark didn't want me going this direction, and that was reason enough to do it.

We'd walked for about fifteen minutes when I heard a hideous roar off to my left. It was the Snark, much closer this time, appearing from a new direction. He showed himself briefly, then raced off.

"I *knew* it!" I whispered excitedly to Chajinka, who just looked confused when I continued to ignore the Snark.

As we kept moving south, the Snark became bolder and bolder, finally getting within a hundred yards of us, but never showing himself long enough for me to get a shot off.

I could feel Chajinka getting tenser and tenser, and finally, when the Snark roared from thirty yards away, the little Dabih raised his spear above his head and raced after him.

"*No!*" I cried. "He'll kill you!"

I tried to grab him, but he was much too quick for me. I followed him into the eight-foot-high grasslike vegetation. It was a damned stupid thing to do: I couldn't see Chajinka, I couldn't see the Snark, and I had no room to maneuver or even sidestep if there was a charge. But he was my friend—probably, if I was honest, my *only* friend—and I couldn't let him face the Snark alone.

Suddenly, I heard the sounds of a scuffle. There was some growling, Chajinka yelled once, and then all was silent.

I went in the direction I thought the sounds had come from, pushing the heavy grasses aside. Then I was making my way through thornbush, and the thorns ripped at my arms and legs. I paid no attention, but kept looking for Chajinka.

I found him in a clearing. He'd put up the fight of his life—his wounds attested to that—but even with his spear he was no match for a four-hundred-pound predator. He recognized me, tried to say something that I wouldn't have understood anyway, and died just as I reached his side.

I knew I couldn't stay in the heavy bush with the Snark still around. This was *his* terrain. So I made my way back to the trail and continued to the south. The Snark roared from cover, but didn't show himself.

After another quarter mile, I came to a huge tree with a hollow trunk. I

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was about to walk around it when I heard a high-pitched whimpering coming from inside it. I approached it carefully, my rifle ready, the safety off—

—and suddenly the Snark broke out of cover no more than fifteen yards away and charged me with an ear-splitting roar.

He was on me so fast that I didn't have time to get off a shot. He swiped at me with a mighty paw. I ducked and turned away, but the blow caught me on the shoulder and sent me flying. I landed on my back, scrambled to my feet, and saw him standing maybe ten feet away. My rifle was on the ground right next to him.

He charged again. This time I was ready. I dove beneath his claws, rolled as I hit the ground, got my hands on my weapon, and got off a single shot as he turned to come at me again.

"Got you, you bastard!" I yelled in triumph.

At first, I thought I might have hit him too high in the chest to prove fatal, but he collapsed instantly, blood spurting from the wound—and I noticed that he had a festering wound on his side, doubtless from Marx's shot a week ago. I watched him for a moment, then decided to "pay the insurance," the minimal cost of a second bullet, to make sure he didn't get back up and do any damage before he died. I walked over to stick the muzzle of my rifle in his ear, found that I didn't have a clear shot, and reached out to nudge his head around with my toe.

I felt something like an electric surge within my head, and suddenly, though I'd never experienced anything remotely like it before, I knew I was in telepathic communication with the dying Snark.

Why did you come to my land to kill me? he asked, more puzzled than angry.

I jumped back, shocked—and lost communication with him. Obviously it could only happen when we were in physical contact. I squatted down and took his paw in my hands, and felt his fear and pain.

Then he was dead, and I stood up and stared down at him, my entire universe turned upside down—because during the brief moment that I had shared his thoughts, I learned what had *really* happened.

The Snark's race, sentient but non-technological, was never numerous, and had been wiped out by a virulent disease. Through some fluke, he alone survived it. The others had died decades ago, and he had led a life of terrifying loneliness ever since.

He knew our party was on Dodgson IV the very first day we landed. He was more than willing to share his hunting ground with us, and made no attempt to harm us or scare us off.

He had thought the killing of the crystal-horned buck was a gift of friendship; he didn't understand that he was stealing Marx's trophy because the concept of trophies was completely alien to him. He killed Marx only after Marx wounded him.

Even then, he was willing to forgive us. Those dead animals we found in my traps were his notion of a peace offering.

He couldn't believe that we really wanted to kill him, so he decided he would visit the camp and try to communicate with us. When he got there, he mistook the Dabihs' t-packs for weapons and destroyed them. Then, certain that this would be seen as an act of aggression even though he hadn't harmed anyone, he left before we woke up.

He came back to try one last time to make peace with us. This time he made no attempt to enter the camp unseen. He marched right in, fully pre-

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pared to be questioned and examined by these new races. But what he *wasn't* prepared for was being attacked by the Dabihs. Fighting in self-defense, he made short work of them. Mbele raced into the ship, either to hide or to get a weapon. He knew first-hand what Marx's weapon had done to him at fifty yards, and he didn't dare let Mbele shoot at him from the safety of the ship, so he raced into it and killed him before he could find a weapon.

After that it was war. He didn't know why we wanted to kill him, but he no longer doubted that we did . . . and while there was a time when he would have welcomed an end to his unhappy, solitary existence, he now had a reason, indeed a driving urge, to stay alive at all costs. . . .

. . . because he wasn't a *he* at all; he was an *it*. The Snark was an asexual animal that reproduced by budding. Its final thought was one of enormous regret, not that it would die, for it understood the cycles of life and death, but that now its offspring would die as well.

I stared down at the Snark's body, my momentary feeling of triumph replaced by an overwhelming sense of guilt. What I had thought was my triumph had become nothing less than genocide in the space of a few seconds.

I heard the whimpering again, and I walked back to the hollow tree trunk and looked in. There, trembling and shrinking back from me, was a very small, very helpless version of the Snark.

I reached out to it, and it uttered a tiny, high-pitched growl as it huddled against the back of the trunk.

I spoke gently, moved very slowly, and reached out again. This time it stared at my hand for a long moment, and finally, hesitantly, reached out to touch it. The instant we made contact, I was able to feel its all-encompassing terror.

Do not be afraid, little one, I said silently. *Whatever happens, I will protect you. I owe you that much.*

Its fear vanished, for you cannot lie when you are telepathically linked, and a moment later it emerged from its hiding place.

I looked off into the distance. Men would be coming soon. The rescue party would touch down in the next week or two. They'd find Marx's body in the hold, and they'd exhume the Desmonds and Mbele and the eleven Dabihs. They'd read the captain's diary and know that all this carnage was caused by an animal called a Snark.

And since they were a hunting company, they'd immediately outfit a safari to kill the Snark quickly and efficiently. No argument could possibly deter them, not after losing an entire party of Men and Dabihs.

But they would be in for a surprise, because *this* Snark not only knew the terrain, but knew how Men thought and acted, and was armed with Man's weapons.

The infant reached out to me and uttered a single word. I tried to repeat it, laughed at how badly I mispronounced it, took the tiny creature in my arms, and went off into the bush to learn a little more about being a Father Snark while there was still time.

In the midst of the word he was trying to say,
In the midst of his laughter and glee,
He had softly and suddenly vanished away—
For the Snark was a Boojum, you see. ○

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

The Griffin Sings

It's a sad fact that most modern fantasy novels end up sounding pretentious when they intend to sound portentous, muzzy instead of mystical, and bathetic rather than bardic. It's a rare book these days that manages to capture the real magic inherent in our familiar creation, or in a deep subcreation.

Luckily, we have writers like Patricia McKillip to remind us how to weave true tapestries of uncanny dreams. Since her first children's novel in 1973, McKillip has kept a relatively low profile—no nine-volume blockbuster series for her—while delivering books beloved by connoisseurs of vivid writing and fantastical verities. Her latest, *Song for the Basilisk* (Ace, hardcover, $22.95, 314 pages, ISBN 0-441-00447-4), continues this admirable record.

From a seemingly metaphorical opening scene—"The ash crawled out of the hearth"—that transmogrifies into painful reality, right on to a surprising ending that confounds clichés, McKillip never flags in her dedication or invention. Her characters exhibit brightness of being, her plot devices surprise, and her tone and themes harmonize beautifully. This book surely merits an audience as wide as that for any overtouted flashy trilogy.

The charming city of Berylon was once ruled uneasily by four royal houses—until Arioso Pellior, the Basilisk, waged a war that nearly exterminated his strongest rival (the house of Tormalyne, whose symbol was the griffin), and which firmly leashed the other two antagonistic clans. Thinking he had murdered all the Tormalyne heirs, the Basilisk overlooked one child—a boy concealed in the crawling ashes described above. Sent by friends of the family to the safety of a remote abbey of bards, the boy, renamed Rook Caladrius, grows up ignorant of his heritage, yet somehow fearful of his buried past.

Thirty-seven years pass, and Caladrius is a middle-aged music teacher with a son of his own. (This brilliant stroke of characterization immediately conveys some of McKillip's ability to confound overused myths.) Events force him to reclaim his heritage, along with a music-based magic he's earlier denied. Setting out for Berylon, Caladrius seems bent on pure revenge.

In the city, our focus is on two women: Magister Giulia, a young music teacher, and Princess Luna, the Basilisk's older daughter. The former is a sharp and sensible figure of rationality, wit and compassion, while the latter is a dark, devilish, amoral murderer. Intersecting with both women, Caladrius will find his fate alternately in the grip of one or another. Yet by the story's end, each of these women will do unexpected things that surprise both themselves and their friends, leading to a wild climax that undermines the standard revenge motif in fertile ways.

Like Lisa Goldstein's *A Mask for the General* (1987), this is a book about speaking truth to power, about the worth of the individual and the family versus the weight

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and responsibilities of leadership. McKillip has subtle observations about both spheres.

Caladrius's favorite instrument is the one-stringed rustic "picochet"; Princess Luna's favorite occult traps are intricate assemblages of "mirrors; lenses and prisms, copper rods and weights." A fusion of picochet and trap, McKillip's marvelous novel manages to partake of both the simple and the complex simultaneously, and that's real magic.

Riding the Zero-Zero

Critics such as John Clute and Gary Westfahl have recently identified a contemporary malaise or transition state of the SF field: the failure of the consensus Golden Age future history to withstand the press of *fin-de-siècle* events and attitudes. Galactic Empires and conquering humanity have now become the province of semi-campy movie directors, while if these tropes appear in print at all, it is with considerable postmodern, self-referential tweaking disruptive of innocent emotional engagement.

As one of the Silver Age writers who did yeoman duty in refining the genre's shared vision, Poul Anderson seems like the last person inclined to undercut it. Yet in his newest novel, *Starfarers* (Tor, hardcover, $25.95, 383 pages, ISBN 0-312-86037-4), he comes perilously close to doing so, pulling mankind's chestnuts out of the cosmic fire only at the last minute. The ultimate effect of this novel is elegiac, evocative more of Flandry's dreaded Long Night than the heroics of "The Star Plunderer" (1952).

In Anderson's future, humans have tapped the quantum energies of the universal ground state to drive their sublight starships. Relativistic time-distortions prevail, rendering every voyage among the handful of colonies an era-hopping experience. Having detected the extensive traces of other starfarers some sixty thousand light years away, the earthlings determine to mount an expedition there, hoping to learn how to improve their own "zero-zero" stardrive. A large ship, the *Envoy*, is built and a crew of ten selected. When—if—they return, it will be after thousands of external years, only a tiny fraction of which the wanderers will personally experience. In effect, they are exiling themselves from all they have known, hurling themselves into the future.

Anderson, of course, has played with these scales before, notably in *Tau Zero* (1970). But his concerns here are not cosmological, but concern the role and destiny of intelligence. When the spunky, conflicted crew—Anderson's patented mix of bold leaders, valkyric women, and misguided ideologues—finally make contact with the aliens, they are confronted with the theory that starfaring may be only a temporary phase in any race's development, and a destructive phase at that. How the humans move beyond this shock, and what revelations they return with, form the climax of the tale.

Along the way, the unfailingly masterful Anderson gives us an intriguing first-contact tale, a portrait of earthbound civilization reminiscent of Oswald Spengler, and lots of speculative material, such as why von Neumann machines haven't overrun the universe. But his main literary and intellectual energies focus on the quandary closest to his heart: do we have a destiny larger than our own backyard? That one of our best elder artists still manages, after much agonized debate, to answer in the affirmative is perhaps a true sign that we will indeed triumph.

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The Little Engines that Could

As I've often said before, few experiences in a reviewer's life are more rewarding than encountering a new writer with a distinctive voice. Especially one who's a little loopy in that classic anti-mundane SF manner. Paul Cook is my happy discovery this time around. His *The Engines of Dawn* (Roc, mass-market, $5.99, 286 pages, ISBN 0-451-45736-6) reads like Neal Stephenson's *The Big U* (1984) hybridized with John Stith's *Redshift Rendezvous* (1990). If that's not a whacked enough combination for you, I refer you to his prior book, *Fortress on the Sun* (1997), an equally unique novel. What starts out as the straightforward story of a prison station tethered to our sun evolves in short order to a literary conversation akin to van Vogt meeting Philip K. Dick at John Campbell's house, through an introduction from Charles Harness.

In *Engines*, the time is several centuries onward from our age. Mankind has had FTL travel for some time, but only at the sufferance of aliens. The Enamorati provide every engine for every human ship, refusing to disclose their technology. They also tend the engines, and consequently have sealed living quarters aboard every vessel (ships often so big that onboard teleporters handle travel from one section to another). A human cult has grown up around the Enamorati and their engines, believing that the "transspace" operations of the engines are holy, while other humans suspect the aliens of ulterior motives and long for species independence. This is the balance that is soon to be undermined, thanks to the discoveries of Ben Bennett, newly graduated student aboard the university ship *Eos*. Along with his colorful school buddies, Ben will be instrumental in turning the status quo upside down—but will nearly die several times in his quest for justice.

Cook's method of plotting here remains a bit van Vogtian—albeit not so much as in *Fortress*—as new concepts and twists are tossed out every few pages. Yet Cook adheres to a more rigorous logic than van Vogt ever did, and eventually ties up all loose ends. His generally underplayed humor is refreshing, and Ben and his cohorts come across as engagingly believable. Ben's tentative romance with archeological student Julia Waxwing also convinces.

I don't think I'll be revealing too much if I say that Ben and pals finally succeed in liberating mankind from the yoke of the Enamorati—there's just too much excitement, too many surprises, going on along the way for my disclosure to spoil anything. And the fact that the implementation of the new human-based stardrive simultaneously solves the shipboard plague of male impotence in a way Cook has invisibly prepped us for is just the most outrageous example of his clever hijinks.

Improper Science

At the conclusion of Gregory Benford's enthralling new study of mankind's reach across the millennia, *Deep Time* (Bard, hardcover, $20.00, 225 pages, ISBN 0-380-97537-8), he coins the term used as our heading here: "Improper science [is] science thinking about itself as a human agenda in the dimension of time. . . . It necessarily speculates, making ranging forays into territories seldom illuminated coherently in our era of intense narrowness." Benford's book admirably embodies this definition, offering fascinating examinations of some of the big issues currently facing us, issues that

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simultaneously bridge great gaps of time. Part One deals with how to mark nuclear waste dumps in a fashion that will safeguard unborn generations. Part Two recounts the abortive attempt to place an informative plaque on the Cassini space probe. Part Three explores how to save at least a few endangered species from the mass extinctions underway. And Part Four offers a grand synthesis, envisioning our whole Gaian globe as a unified message to the future. Benford's wry, engaged, clear-eyed prose carries the reader along without unnecessary hand-holding. This may be "improper" science, but it's highly pertinent, and deserves to be popular as well.

Can we label the hundred years just past with a single tag? Why not call this period with some justification "The Quantum Century"? Starting with J. J. Thomson's discovery of the electron in 1897, our dominant intellectual paradigms have involved quanta of some sort, as you will discern if you pick up John Gribbin's *Q is for Quantum* (Free Press, hardcover, $35.00, 545 pages, ISBN 0-684-85578-X). Subtitled *An Encyclopedia of Particle Physics,* Gribbin's book covers a vast amount of territory in alphabetical entries all conscientiously interconnected. Many graphs, diagrams, timelines and photos contribute to the reader's sense of mastery on at least a layman's level of the counter-intuitive world below the Planck level. Entries for pre-quantum predecessors as far back as Newton establish context, and biographical tidbits convey the essential humanity of the scientists who have labored to create this quarky cathedral.

Until we are blessed with Rudy Rucker's fifth *'Ware* novel, we must content ourselves with such allied speculative works as Hans Moravec's *Robot* (Oxford University Press, hardcover, $25.00, 227 pages, ISBN 0-19-511630-5). A sequel of sorts to Moravec's seminal *Mind Children* (1988), *Robot*—despite its lackluster title—contains nearly as many startling visions as his earlier thesis. Continuing his crusade to single-handedly give birth to our miraculous silicon heirs, Moravec is upfront about earlier failed predictions, but remains resolutely sanguine about future developments in AI. Depicting in exuberant language a cosmos where intelligence infiltrates the very substratum of existence, Moravec succeeds in convincing the reader—at least for the duration of the book—that he has a direct line to our transmogrified immortal destiny.

Anyone who has enjoyed Stephen Baxter's counterfactual stories of the space program should pick up Robert Zimmerman's *Genesis: The Story of Apollo 8* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hardcover, $25.95, 299 pages, ISBN 1-56858-118-1). With graceful window-glass style, Zimmerman thrillingly recounts mankind's first venture beyond Earth's larger sphere of gravity. Placing the mission in colorful historical context, providing empathetic characterizations of all the players from astronauts Anders, Borman, and Lovell on down, this book astonishes with its recreation of the crude technology (4K computers and 8mm film cameras) and eternal spirit behind the landmark voyage. Whether you lived through this period or not, you'll find this paean to space exploration—replete with many B&W illos and a section of color shots—a rousing adventure.

Finally, here's a work of scientific re-visioning destined to provoke controversy: *Muddling Through* (Counterpoint, hardcover, $27.50, 331 pages, ISBN 1-887178-48-1), whose authors are Mike Fortun and Herbert Bernstein. The thesis of

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this provocative book is that the current public image of how science is practiced and what it can deliver is a well-meaning but harmful lie. In the view of these physicists, far from being a hard-edged "objective" methodology and tool, science at its truest is "muddling through," or in other terms, "a dense, intricate, and volatile assemblage of practices, metaphors, articulations, and other kludged-together elements of nature, culture, and power." Dissecting the revolutions birthed by Darwin, Galileo, and Copernicus among others, utilizing humor, aphorisms, wordplay, copious examples and liberal doses of imagination, the authors deliver in juicy, bite-sized sections a stimulating re-formation of the mythos at the heart of our culture.

Four Hundred Billion Stars

Here's some suggested roadwork you might undertake to build up your literary muscles prior to climbing into the ring with Brian Charles Clark's world-heavyweight-champion novel, *Splitting* (Wordcraft, trade, $9.00, 172 pages, ISBN 1-877655-30-9). Jump rope with all of Salvador Dali's eccentric prose. Spar a few rounds with Lance Olsen's novels. Get into a clinch with Kathy Acker's subversive detournings. Pump iron with Damon Knight's *Humpty Dumpty* (1996). Jog a few miles with the collected works of Ishmael Reed and Colin Wilson. Then finish off with a massage while listening to the complete catalog of Parliament/Funkadelic.

On the other hand, why not just let yourself be knocked out by the phenomenal language and stimulating skylarking of *Splitting* without any pre-fight strategizing? In this hallucinatory yet grounded tale, a nameless woman—sometimes embodied, sometimes not—narrates the struggle of a band of desperate yet funky individualist dreamers plotting to escape the mind-domination of a race of potassium-based aliens who have long enslaved humanity. Our narrator employs a richly allusive and punning style, half Joyce, half William Burroughs, seen to best effect in set-pieces such as the invasion of "Cern Francisco" by Alaric the Astralgoth. As lagniappe, this novel is also stuffed with enough potent speculative material for six conventional SF books.

If, as Clark perceptively notes, "People are readily hypnotized by their own analogies," then *Splitting* stands both as hypnagogic bible and its own decommissioning anti-text.

Jeffrey Thomas's *Punktown* (The Ministry of Whimsy, trade, $11.99, 128 pages, ISBN 1-890464-04-X) consists of ten elegant stories that jointly conduct a sometimes shocking, sometimes droll, sometimes sentimental tour of Thomas's own Interzone-like, Burroughsian metropolis. Centuries ago, on a faraway planet originally inhabited by a race called the Choom, humans established their colony known as Paxtown, nowadays more commonly called Punktown. This roisterous, rancid, ribald conglomeration now seethes with various alien and human races like some postmodern version of a Leigh Brackett, *Planet Stories* Martian slum. Through its dank, dangerous streets pass artists and thugs, clones and robots, all bent on personal quests of varying weirdness. In a story like "Immolation," Thomas sounds notes similar to Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). "The Palace of Nothingness" evokes Robert Aickman or Thomas Ligotti. And in "The Library of Sorrows," Thomas seems positively Eganish. (Only "Face," the tale of a distraught parent, seems a non-essential part of this

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SF panorama, being basically translatable without loss to a mimetic venue.) My personal favorite here is "Precious Metal," a noirish tale of gangsters and a cybernetic battle of the bands. Cross Punktown's city lines, by all means, but watch your step.

I've finally found a book worthy of being shelved next to my copy of Katherine Briggs's *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* (1976). Joseph Nigg's *The Book of Fabulous Beasts* (Oxford University Press, hardcover, $30.00, 408 pages, ISBN 0-19-509561-8) assiduously assembles excerpts from a wealth of primary texts to chart the origin and development of western civilization's belief in various mythological creatures. From ancient Mesopotamia to the present, Nigg conducts a tour of a menagerie that never was, one worthy of Dr. Seuss. Nigg's lucid framing material places enthralling snippets from Aristotle to Borges in crystal-clear context. Learn how the manticore and the phoenix came to assume the shapes we recognize today, and discover lesser-known but even more incredible entities, such as the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, a beast I'm surely charmed by. This book is like reading a handful of lost Avram Davidson essays, and that's high praise.

David Pringle, erudite editor of *Interzone*, now delivers *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Carlton Books, hardcover, £19.99, 256 pages, ISBN 1-85868-3726), a good companion to John Clute's *The Encylopedia of Fantasy* (1997). Lively, refreshingly opinionated essays and evaluations of the authors and books in SF's sister genre by Pringle and his partners—Brian Stableford, David Langford, and Tom Dedopulos—are fleshed out with numerous illutrations and photos. The chronological presentation of fantasy in the cinema serves perfectly to illustrate just how sophisticated such films have become. And a few Britishisms, such as "hoovering" for vacuuming, add a patina of glamor to the volume for American readers. My only complaint with this wide-ranging book is a lack of credit for the artists involved. I was unable to spot any bylines for the majority of paintings, and that's a shame.

You will certainly not encounter such a deficit in *Pulp Culture* (Collector's Press, hardcover, $39.95, 204 pages, ISBN 1-888054-12-3), lovingly researched and collated by SF author Frank Robinson and polymath Lawrence Davidson. This nostalgic ramble through the heyday of the pulp magazines favors image over text, although the intimate, friendly wordage is by no means shabby. Hundreds of gorgeous, startling, laughable pulp covers—all with artist credits when known—are reproduced on glossy paper in a rainbow of high-density inks. The choices made by the editors are for the most part utterly fresh, with overused illustrations eschewed. One of the biggest kicks for an SF fan surely stems from seeing familiar names—Bergey, Rogers, Brown—working in different genres. This feast of painted dreams will provide endless hours of marvelment.

Pulp Fictions concentrates on the popular literature of the era just prior to the years Robinson and Davidson worship. Two of PF's worthwhile new reprints are valuable yet relatively familiar: Haggard's *When the World Shook* (trade, $9.95, 272 pages, ISBN 1-902058-07-0) and Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (trade, $9.95, 224 pages, ISBN 1-902058-08-9). But the third is a real find: Dr. Gordon Stables's *Kidnapped by Cannibals* (trade, $9.95, 287 pages, ISBN 1-902058-06-2). Recounting the gee-whiz adventures of seventeen-year-old

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Willie Stuart as he and his friend Bob find themselves coddling yet subverting their man-eating captors in the South Pacific, this book (1899) continues to weave its spell despite now-blatant instances of imperialism, racism, and sexism. But it's foolish to castigate a relic like this, especially when confronted with sentences along the lines of: "Now these awful soldiers of King Bolo-boloo were on the war-path, and Willie knew that in all likelihood their arrows were poisoned, and that a single scratch would mean an agonizing death."

Palace Corbie Eight (Merrimack Books, trade, $15.95, 285 pages, ISBN 1-888283-08-4) is the final installment in a long-running zine/anthology whose previous issues I've missed—to my dismay, if they were all as rich as this culminating one. To label the stories and poems here "horror" is unnecessarily limiting. The running theme among the entries is the unease and disquiet and fears underlying our mortal existence, but the forms range across SF, gothic, and fantasy. Styles vary also, from mimetic to surreal to experimental. Mark Rich's affecting parable, "Think of the Dead Monkey in the Sky," opens the collection with panache, while as mid-point anchor we enjoy Jeff VanderMeer's crafty novella, "The Transformation of Martin Lake," a tale of bohemian existence among the artists of the mysterious city of Ambergris, over which hover the spirits of Poe and Nabokov. And fine pieces from Tom Piccirilli, Yvonne Navarro, and Mark McLaughlin are just the frosting on this nightshade-laced cake.

Australian enigma D. J. Williams writes no worse than Gardner Fox, Robert Moore Williams, or Vargo Statten, and on shakier foundations entire careers have been built. Williams's tripartite novel, *Trix* (Trex Publishing, trade, $16.95, 435 pages, ISBN 0-646-213-17-2) details the maturation of the eponymous female orphan on the watery world of T1, as she goes from waif to law enforcement agent in a series of bustling adventures. Never say they don't churn them out like this anymore.

Ace cultural critic Mark Dery's *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium* (Grove Press, hardcover, $25.00, 295 pages, ISBN 0-8021-1640-X) is a collection of essays subtitled "American culture on the brink." With the surgical recklessness of William Burrough's Dr. Benway and the unflinching vision of Lenny Bruce, Dery dissects such puzzling millennial phenomena as psychotic clowns, Jim Carrey, tattoos, Damien Hirst's meat sculptures, Disney's model town of Celebration, *The X-Files* and the Unabomber. Apothegms like "The Brita filter is our fallout shelter, the existential personal flotation device of the nervous nineties," provide endless quotable insights. Like some shameless sideshow performer himself (the book's title comes from an antiquated description of Coney Island amusement parks), Dery sends a galvanic shock through the sickly hybrid monster of American excess.

An impassioned essay on the compatibility of art and science opens up Keith Allen Daniel's newest fantastical poetry collection, *Satan is a Mathematician* (Anamnesis Press, trade, $12.95163 pages, ISBN 0-9631203-6-0). What follows is the proof of the pudding: ingenious and affecting poems in a variety of modes, from pastiche to narrative. The presiding spirits here are Emily Dickinson, Ambrose Bierce, and Jim Morrison. Here's "Vampire Poem" in its entirety: "The words leap up to bite you on the neck,/And leave their tell-tale hickies made of text./Illiterates mistake you for the dead./Awake within your coffin you're unread."

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In *Not the Only Planet* (Lonely Planet, trade, $12.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-86442-568-582-1), Damien Broderick has assembled a solid yet stellar, anthology worthy of the editorial talents of Judith Merril, Terry Carr, or Groff Conklin. Ten SF gems on the theme of travel range from Joanna Russ's hilarious "Useful Phrases for the Tourist" to Robert Silverberg's sobering "Trips." A particular gem is Greg Egan's "Yeyuka," which appears in neither of Egan's two collections. Pop this volume into your duffel at the start of your next peregrination.

Finally, two superlative single-author collections deserve your attention. Andrew Weiner's *This is the Year Zero* (Pottersfield Press, trade, Can$16.95, 192 pages, ISBN 1-895900-14-X) reminds me of Wayne Wightman's *Ganglion* (1995): a compendium of well-crafted, insightful, and exciting magazine SF unfortunately fallen into relative obscurity. Weiner writes quietly, yet deals in wild scenarios, like a combination of Kafka and Jack Finney. His aliens are the most obscurely intentioned sophonts outside the works of Barry Malzberg, yet somehow ultra-relevant to the human dilemma. A pair of previously unpublished pieces—"The New Frequencies" and "The Disappearance Artist"—satisfy to a small degree my craving for new Weiner, but we should all hope for more from him on a regular basis.

Robert Reed certainly maintains a higher profile than Weiner, yet *The Dragons of Springplace* (Golden Gryphon Press, hardcover, $23.95, 312 pages, ISBN 0-9655901-6-X) is Reed's first volume of short stories, and a masterful one it is. Ranging from the here-and-now (the setting of my favorite piece, "To Church with Mr. Multhiford") to the star-faring future (the linked stories that occur on ancient gigantic interstellar ships), Reed delivers Simakian epiphanies across a variety of scales. In line with the past work the too youthfully deceased editor and publisher Jim Turner did when he was at Arkham House on Nancy Kress's *The Aliens of Earth* (1993) and Mary Rosenblum's *Synthesis & Other Virtual Realities* (1996), this new offering continues to consolidate our invaluable SF heritage in a handsome, affordable format.

Publisher Addresses: Wordcraft, PO Box 3235, La Grande, OR 97850. The Ministry of Whimsy, PO Box 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315. Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10016. Carlton Books, 20 St. Anne's Court, Wardour Street, London W1V 3AW, United Kingdom. Collector's Press, PO Box 230986, Portland, OR 97281. Pulp Fictions, *www.pulpfictions.co.uk*. Merrimack Books, PO Box 80702, Lincoln, NE 68501. Trex Publishing, 18 Challis Street, Newport 3015, Australia. Grove Press, 841 Broadway, NY, NY 10003. Anamnesis Press, PO Box 51115, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Lonely Planet, 150 Linden Street, Oakland, CA 94607. Pottersfield Press, Lawrencetown Beach, 83 Leslie Road, East Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia, Canada B2Z 1P8. Golden Gryphon Press, 364 West Country Lane, Collinsville, IL 62234.

All in Color for a Sawbuck

I recently received the assignment of crafting a trivia quiz on the topic of superheroes, and naturally began nostalgically pondering my childhood love of comics, the fabled entrypoint for so many readers of more "mature" SF. Receiving a batch of new titles from DC Comics provided further impetus to assess how tightly prose SF and graphic SF are interlinked. Sharing writers,

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themes, and tropes, the two modes of speculative storytelling are inseparable and owe much to each other. Any broadminded SF reader would be well repaid by delving into the latest work of the talented writers and artists laboring on the other side of our common fence.

The recent death of Batman's dad, Bob Kane, tinges with melancholy the retrospective collection *Batman in the Sixties* (trade, $19.95, 224 pages, ISBN 1-56389-491-2). In this anthology of some of the best Caped Crusader stories from a tumultuous decade, we can witness a social and artistic progression that mirrors the larger culture shifts of those years. From the silliness of Bat-Mite to the seriousness of street crime, a host of scripters, pencilers, and inkers bring one of the century's great heroes along a vivid, pop-art journey. And, yes, Carmine Infantino is God.

A spooky new take on the Dark Knight can be found in *Batman: Nosferatu* (trade, $5.95, 64 pages, ISBN 1-56389-379-7), where expressionistic genius Ted McKeever uses his palette of greys and shocking gouts of color to give shape to the script of Randy and Jean-Marc Lofficier. An alternate version of the Bat-man in which "Bruss Wayneson" incarnates more as vampire than bat (a natural enough connection), this story makes intelligent use of cinematic stylings to rework a potent myth. See if you can spot the subtle visual allusion to Wonder Woman on page 22.

Starman was a minor Golden Age hero whose career has been cleverly revived and extended since 1994 by author James Robinson with the aid of a passel of bright-eyed artists. Robinson's fourth collection, *Starman: Times Past* (trade, $17.95, 176 pages, ISBN 1-56389-492-0) does not feature the newest Starman, but rather his earlier avatars. Linked by the presence of a mysterious hero-villain called The Shade, these stories range across the whole history of the gravity-rod-wielding defender of Opal City, one of the gentler and more thoughtful of the costumed crime-fighters. In my favorite, "1976: Super Freaks and Backstabbers," Doctor-Strange-type weirdness meets KC and the Sunshine Band.

Like *Starman*, *Astro City Family Album* (trade, $19.95, 224 pages, ISBN 1-58240-034-2) harks back to a simpler era, functioning as an homage to a gentler time, yet still vital in its own artistic domain. With immense visual and verbal sophistication, the team of Kurt Busiek, Brent Eric Anderson, Will Blyberg, and Alex Ross depict the idyllic, superhero-rich environment of sumptuous Astro City, a conflation of Seattle and Oz. Mix equal parts Harvey Pekar, Dave Stevens, Mark Schultz, and Mike Allred, add a dash of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, decant and quaff slowly, for it's a heady mix. But a wise introduction by Harlan Ellison says all this much more evocatively than me.

Alex Ross's solo artwork takes center stage in the astounding, unnerving, wrathful *Uncle Sam* (hardcover, $17.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-56389-436-X), written by Steve Darnall. The title character, our familiar bearded and top-hatted national icon, has been reduced to an accursed Melmoth the Wanderer, stumbling across our greed-ravaged, hate-raddled, ignorance-saddled America. Will he regain his sanity and will to live, his principles and moral force before we as a nation sink into utter barbarity? Perhaps only if we all take the time to read this visually and textually searing indictment and ponder our own role in the ongoing degradation.

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* mythos continues under alternate capable hands after the departure of its cre-

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ator in *The Dreaming: Through the Gates of Horn and Ivory* (trade, $19.95, 224 pages, ISBN 1-56389-493-9) The intersection of our earthly existence with the archetypes of the kingdom of Dream produces horror and whimsy in these tales, the former quality evident in two three-parters scripted by Caitlin Kiernan—"Souvenirs" and "The Unkindness of One"—while the latter comes across best in "My Year as a Man," by Peter Hogan. An assortment of visual styles rounds out a rich reading experience, although perhaps one that's a bit less so for the novice unsteeped in the long backstory of this series.

Another long-running series is *Preacher*, now up to Book 6, *War in the Sun* (trade, $14.95, 238 pages, ISBN 1-56389-490-4). Yet a convenient character-chart and backstory synopsis provide an easy entry to this engagingly apocalyptic satire, where God has absconded and mortals struggle for meaning. In this installment of writer Garth Ennis's Blishian passion play—by turns ultraviolent, tender, and silly—some significant real changes occur in our protagonists. Dubious messiah Jesse Custer and his Aryan nemesis Starr both experience parallel disfigurements, while an unlikely romance blossoms between vampire Cassidy and gunslinger Tulip O'Hare. All conveyed in Steve Dillon's artwork, which stands shoulder-to-shoulder with that of Enki Bilal or Moebius.

Finally, we have Grant Morrison's ineffable *The Invisibles: Counting to None* (trade, $19.95, 239 pages, ISBN 1-56389-489-0), again with helpful prefatory material. Morrison's ongoing series is perhaps the most conceptually rich in today's comics, blending literary influences such as Dick, Moorcock, and Burroughs with occult material and the mushroom wisdom of Terence McKenna. A passel of funky boho wild-talents are all that stand between mankind and Armageddon, as time-travel paradoxes, merging metaverses, and cult-warfare proliferate. "The gun focuses my will, so I can telepathically scramble the mantras they use to maintain the time-travel trance." If that snippet of dialogue comes over on your wavelength, you need to become a member of The Invisibles. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

A packed schedule this time. For con(vention)s abroad and WorldCons, phone me. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 1999

22-24—**MileHiCon.** For info, write: **Box 101322, Denver CO 80250.** Or phone: **(303) 657-5912** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Lakewood CO (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: Lois McMaster Bujold. (E-mail) **lindanel@ix.netcom.com.** (Web) **eco-net.com/milehicon.** $28 at the door.

22-24—**TusCon. (520) 881-3709.** (E-mail) **basfa@azstarnet.com.** Executive Inn, Tucson AZ. Ed Bryant.

22-24—**Arcana.** (E-mail) **jbrower@webtv.net.** Holiday Inn Express, St. Paul MN. Ramsey Campbell. Dark fantasy.

22-24—**HubCon. (806) 789-1501.** (E-mail) **chairman@hubcon.org.** Holiday Inn, Lubbock TX. J. Bulloch, E. Kristiansen.

29-31—**ConStellation. (256) 880-8210.** Airport Sheraton, Huntsville AL. A. Steele, D. Weber, D. Elliott, the Fellers.

29-31—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest.** (Web) **www.inkspot.com/ovff/.** Wyndham Dublin, Columbus OH. SF/fantasy folksinging.

29-31—**Ditto. (612) 823-1497.** (E-mail) **karen@counterpane.com.** Radisson Metrodome, Minneapolis. For fanzine fans.

29-31—**TerraCon. (206) 528-2908.** (E-mail) **terracon@iname.com.** Best Western Executive Inn, Fife WA. Duncan, Tackett.

29-31—**MOCtoberFest. (706) 769-7502.** (E-mail) **moc@negia.net.** History Village, Athens GA. No program; just parties.

29-31—**FrisCon.** (E-mail) **friscon@plasticcow.com.** (Web) **plasticcow.com/friscon.** San Francisco CA. Adult media 'zines.

29-31—**Chiller Theatre. (201) 804-8040.** (Web) **www.chillertheatre.com.** Sheraton, Secaucus NJ. Horror films. $15.

30—**Monster News Party. (916) 722-3595.** (Web) **themonsterclub.com.** Heritage Hotel, Sacramento CA. Horror media.

30-31—**Trek Celebration. (913) 327-8735. sfedora1@aol.com.** (Web) **www.sfedora.com.** Boise ID. Commercial event.

30-31—**VulKon. (954) 441-8735.** Holiday Inn, Strongsville (Cleveland) OH. Jeff Conaway. Commercial Star Trek event.

NOVEMBER 1999

4-7—**World Fantasy Con, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 776-3243.** Westin, Providence RI. McKillip. "Voyages".

5-7—**United Fan Con, 500 Monroe Tpk., Monroe CT 06468. (781) 986-8735.** Marriott, Springfield MA. Picardo. Trek con.

5-7—**Primedia, Box 21146, RPO Meadowville, Mississauga ON L5N 6A2. (905) 820-3844.** Toronto. Shanks, Masterson.

5-7—**EclectiCon, 9-11 Ayres Ct., Bayonne NJ 07002.** (E-mail) **eclecticon@aol.com.** Ramada, Newark NJ. Media fanzines.

5-7—**NovaCon, % Morton, 14 Park St., Lye, Stourbridge, W. Midl. DY9 8SS, UK.** Britannia Hotel, Birmingham England.

5-7—**NekoCon, Box 11582, Blacksburg VA 24062. nekocon@eskimo.com.** Holiday Inn, Virginia Beach VA. Anime.

12-14—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. philcon@netaxs.com.** (Web) **philcon.org.** Adams Mark. K. Kurtz.

12-14—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078.** (E-mail) **windycon.org.** Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. Rusch, D. Smith.

12-14—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228.** (E-mail) **info@orycon.org.** Doubletree, Portland OR. N. Thomas, Griffith.

13-14—**Creation, 100 W. B'way #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960.** Union Plaza, Las Vegas NV. Commercial con.

13-14—**VulKon, Box 821673, South Florida FL 33082. (954) 441-8735.** Orlando FL. A. Katsulas. Commercial Trek event.

19-21—**ExotiCon, Box 9431, Bridge City LA 70096. (504) 436-3378.** Quality, Metairie LA. Tom Savini, S. & J. Robinson.

19-21—**EarthGate, Box 3194, Cuyahoga Falls OH 44223. nuntukamen@yahoo.com.** Continental Inn, Lexington KY.

19-21—**CozyCon, c/o A. van Ewyck, Obrechtstraat 4, The Hague 2517 VT, Netherlands. cozycon@cena.demon.nl.**

19-21—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307. (954) 739-4376. tropicon@scifi.squawk.com.** M. Resnick.

20-21—**Trek Celebr'n, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Des Moines IA. Commercial con.

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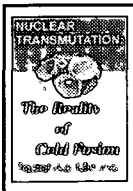

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NEXT ISSUE

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So what's in our January issue?

Appropriately enough for our first issue dated "2000," our lead story is called "Millennium Babies"; it's by Hugo and Nebula-winning author **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** (who also won our Readers Award poll last year, with her story "Echea"), and it's a bittersweet and moving look at how the circumstances of your birth can sometimes affect the rest of your life, for both good and ill.

From the opening years of the new century, best-selling author **William Barton** then takes us even further ahead, to a hard-edged and hard-eyed high-tech future where life is cheap and sentiment is rare, for the compelling and powerful story of a cyborg with a job to do who is presented with a problem—and a temptation—of a particularly messy human kind, in the hard-hitting novella "Heart of Glass."

Also in our January issue, you'll find:

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Acclaimed British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter**, who takes us back to nineteenth century England to unravel an old family mystery, and to invite us to "Behold Now Behemoth"; **Jim Cowan**, who makes a metaphysical yet sprightly *Asimov's* debut with an evocative, whimsical look at "The True Story of Professor Trabuc and His Remarkable Voyages Aboard the *Sonde-Ballon de la Mentalité*"; popular (and pleasingly prolific) new writer **Kage Baker**, who lets us eavesdrop on the last minutes of a mission through time and space (and beneath the surface of the sea) that goes disastrously wrong, in the haunting "Black Smoker"; and new writer **Therese Pieczynski**, making her own *Asimov's* debut, who leads us into the deepest part of the forest and reveals some enigmatic wonders there—for those who have eyes to see—in the eloquent story of what goes on nowadays in "Eden."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column gives us some "Greetings from the Past"; **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" looks at "Readers' Writers"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our January issue on sale on your newsstand on November 23, 1999, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe electronically, online, at our new *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in the rest of the year!

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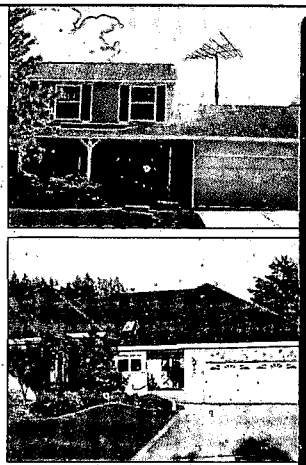
Stealth antenna hides under gutters but performs like big ugly antennas

The new Max Antenna by GE is the low-profile, high-gain way to get flawless reception of broadcast signals without expensive installation.



by Hope Chapman

The Max Antenna by GE is the ultimate TV antenna system.

Electronic engineers agree—your television is only as good as the signal it receives. Both cable and satellite television systems have spent a great deal to improve the quality of their transmission, but they can be extremely expensive, they aren't available in all areas and may not provide access to local TV stations. Luckily, there is a new antenna from GE that will provide breakthrough performance without making your family room look like something out of the fifties.

Clear alternative. The Max Antenna series from GE uses a revolutionary electromagnetic design to maximize installation flexibility and yield longer range reception of off-air VHF and UHF signals. Unlike a conventional dipole antenna, the Max Antenna can receive signals in both vertical and horizontal planes with minimum cross-polarization loss. This design allows for the first low-profile antenna solution that provides numerous installation options.

Superior components. The key to the superiority of this antenna is its ingenious use of the latest electromagnetic technology—providing high gain and full channel coverage as well as the greatest amount of mounting flexibility. First, the antennas were designed around a wide band element to achieve the greatest amount of gain in a relatively small space. Next, an amplifier and matching network was designed to enhance the reception of weak signals. This amplifier also adds very little distortion to the strong signals, giving it a balanced amount of gain. A filter on the amplifier board will allow for good matching between the antenna and amplifier. Special attention was paid to design an antenna-amplifier combination that would be completely compatible with the new digital transmission format. It has been designed for strong signal distortion rejection and a low amount of noise. It is omnidirectional and requires no adjustments, orienting or fine tuning during use. You simply install it, set it and forget it.

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